

Hanako's Story

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Summary: A retelling of Hanako's arc, from her own point of view. An insight into Hanako's mind and heart, and a new look into the life of a unique and extraordinary soul...

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1. Act 1, Chapter 1: Introductions

Act 1 - Chapter One: Introductions

Another day. It starts so simply, like any other, I wake, I wash, I dress. I meet Lilly. I go to class. The teacher, Mutou-sensei, starts his lectures, as always. I avoid the looks of the others in the class. I try to ignore Misha's constant voice in my ear. Since I sit at the back of the room it's not so tough, however loud she can be. But there seems to be something different about today. I can't quite guess what it could be, but soon I don't need to. Just as homeroom ends, Mutou makes an announcement.

"Something I should have mentioned earlier, I guess, but we have a new student joining us today. Should be here soon, so please, try and make him feel welcome."

A new student. Great. Someone else to avoid.

It's not long before he arrives. A young man, tall, with mousey brown hair. As Mutou introduces him, I notice that there doesn't seem to be anything outwardly wrong with him. That's not so surprising. Yamaku is home to so many, with all sorts of disabilities and issues. We have deaf students, like our class rep Shizune. Some, like Lilly, are blind. A girl in another class has a severe heart condition. With others, it's more obvious. Missing limbs, stunted growth. Me.

As I look, I notice the new student looking back at me. I cover my face with my hands. I suppose I've always been a bit self conscious. Hardly a shock given my... condition. As I try to hide, Mutou speaks up.

"...please welcome our newest classmate."

And I realise that I have barely paid attention to what he was saying. He claps his hands together, and dutifully I do too, as does everyone else in the room. Except for those that can't, of course. In response, the new student bows his head a little.

"So... I'm Hisao Nakai. My hobbies are reading and soccer. I hope to get along well with everyone even though I'm a new student."

He says nothing more. After a pause, Mutou continues talking, about everyone getting along, and I space out again, though I make an effort to at least look like I'm listening. At least things are better here than in my old life. It never consoles me much.

As he finishes, everyone starts to clap again. And again, I clap too. I suppose he's not so bad. I always try to avoid other students where possible, save for Lilly, but the teachers are much more understanding. It often throws me, since almost none of them have a condition like the students at Yamaku do. And adults could often be as cruel to me in my early years as the other children were. But I've never been shown anything but kindness from Mutou-sensei, or the other faculty. It's like a small ray of light in the darkness. I notice Mutou talking to the new student. Hisao Nakai. When he turns away he announces that there will be group work, that we are to form sets of three.

What I do next surprises no-one. It's my usual reaction to group work. I simply can't handle it, and there's a sort of... understanding between me and the school. As I quietly leave without a word, I glance at Mutou, who nods silently before turning his attention to the rest of the class. A few eyes follow me, but it's nothing new. I keep on top of my other work, and my grades are always at least average. As long as I can show that I'm still learning something, then nobody questions me.

Yamaku claims to not accept students with mental disabilities. They simply don't have the resources or staff to deal with those people. A missing leg is fine, but if you have Down's Syndrome then you're out of luck. But it's not entirely true. There is a line, of course. But in some cases you can't go through the experience that disables you without some emotional damage. Some instability. I'm hardly an exception to that rule. And allowances can be made.

I go to my usual place of retreat, where I can feel safe from the world outside. Yuuko nods in greeting and we make the usual quiet conversation that has become a feature of my visits. We never have a lot to talk about. I ask her about new books that she promised to order, and then head to the back of the library, where I settle down on my favourite cushion. I start reading the textbook from Mutou's class, so as to catch up on what I miss by being here. A mere chapter later, I put the book down and pick up a new one, that I had started just a few days before. It's an old classic by Mary Shelley, an English author, but translated into Japanese. The time seems to fly by, as I lose myself in the pages. I almost feel a sense of empathy with the creature in the story, misunderstood, but treated as a monster by the ignorant masses. Scared and alone. But as I read, I notice something. The villagers, the doctor, they're scared too. And in their fear, they lash out.

I've read through almost the entire book by the time the bell rings. With a start I am brought back to the physical world, and I remember that it's now lunch time. I put the book away and gather my things, saying a brief goodbye to Yuuko as I leave the library and make my way to the tea room, to meet Lilly.

Lunch is finally over. I make my way back to Mutou's classroom and return to my seat at the back of the room, avoiding everyone's eye. Not many people have returned anyway. As I sit down, I look up and notice someone else enter. It's the new boy, Hisao Nakai. As our eyes meet, I blush a little and try to look away, when another figure crashes in. Misha always has a tendency to be loud, something I learned long ago. When Lilly and Shizune still spoke without daggers in their eyes. All the excitement is too much for me, and I sink further into my seat, making every effort to become invisible. How easier life would be if I could really do that! Misha and Shizune walk past me to their own seats, and I simply sit still as a rock, my nerves tense. In the corner of my eye I notice Hisao looking at me with a curious look on his face. Slowly, the room fills, Mutou arrives, and classes begin again.

A new day. Classes begin, same as always. More group work. I get up and quietly leave, with Mutou's silent blessing. This time, however, I can feel a new pair of eyes on me, watching me leave. I take the opportunity as I reach the door to glance sideways. I see Hisao looking at me with concern. He doesn't seem to notice me looking back. I wonder what he makes of my disappearances during class? He hasn't been at Yamaku long enough to realise it's a normal habit for me. I open the door, step out into the corridor, and make my way to the library.

A crashing sound startles me and wakes me from my reverie. It's been some time since I last looked at a clock, but the windows show the sun appears to be setting. I look around but see nothing that could have caused such a sound. Perhaps Yuuko just banged her head again – common enough with her clumsiness. I look back at the book I'm reading. I finished the Shelley book early on and soon moved on to a new topic, my interests ever changing as new reading material presents itself to me.

Going back to my reading, I hear footsteps. These aren't the footsteps of Yuuko, but rather a louder, heavier sound, more fitting of a tall male than the petite librarian. I realise that hearing people in the library is a rarity. Aside from the library staff the only people to come here regularly are myself and Lilly. Instinctively I raise the book to my face, hiding myself away while continuing to read. Over the top of the book, however, my eyes are still able to peek out and see who else is here.

Of course. The new boy, Hisao. I begin to shy away, sinking further into the beanbag cushion and keeping as much of my face hidden as possible. My eyes dart between the book and the newcomer, unable to focus on one or the other. I try to ignore him and continue reading but it proves impossible to avoid his gaze. He sits down on another beanbag, setting down a pile of books he has clearly picked from the stacks. His eyes meet mine, before they flick away to the book covering most of my face. I am unable to feel insulted, since my embarrassment far outweighs any injury I could feel at his actions.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

His voice cuts across and tries to calm me down, a soothing sound almost tailor-made to put me at ease. The best I can do is stammer a quiet whispered response.

"It... it's okay."

"So, um... do you mind if I sit here?" He replies. To be perfectly honest, I don't know. I can hardly lay claim to the beanbags, or the library, but nevertheless I feel as though I would be unable to withstand such an attack, however unintended, on my own private space. He seems genuinely sorry to disturb me, though, and the look of concern in his eyes is enough to disarm me. I nod gently and say, "Oh... okay."

Hisao sits next to me and I bury my head once more in the book. As I try to concentrate, his voice resonates once more in my ears.

"Life of Pi... never heard of it." A pause. "So, errr... sorry again for startling you. I'm Hisao."

I already know this, of course. He introduced himself to the class, after all. Even so, I hesitate before replying.

"I... know. We... are in the same... same class." I can barely speak, so nervous and timid as I am. But Hisao is making an effort to be nice. It's more than anyone has ever done for me since I met Lilly and her sister. The least I can do is make an effort in return. "H-H-Hanako. I'm... Hanako."

The conversation stalls again. It's as though neither of us knows what to say. I know I don't. The silence is broken once again by Hisao.

"Don't let me interrupt your reading. I'll... just check these books, if you don't mind."

His voice sounds so uneasy. I nod, relieved, and sigh just a little. Silence falls once more, but I can't concentrate. My gaze flickers from the book to Hisao to the stacks to anywhere else. Like a deer caught in headlights. I feel as though just being here is uncomfortable for us both. Every time I see

Hisao, his eyes are drawn to me, to my scars. It's unbearable. It isn't long before our eyes meet again.

I stand up, as if our eyes had caused an electric shock to run through me. I take a deep breath.

"I... I..." I stammer. Hisao responds with the same short sound. Then it comes rushing out of me, in a single breath.

"I'vegottogodosomething!"

I can't take it. The pressure, the nerves, the awkward silences. Hisao noticing my scars. As soon as the words leave my lips I run, reaching the counter and fleeing past Yuuko and Lilly, out of the library and away. As I leave I notice that Hisao has followed, much too late, and looking back in the corridor I see he hasn't followed far. He hasn't even left the library. I'm glad of that. I couldn't face seeing him again after what just happened. I slow down, walking to the tea room. As I reach the door, Lilly appears in the corridor behind me. She must have left to find me after I ran. She can't see me, of course, so maybe she assumed I would come to the tea room, the closest place where I can feel safe. I wait until she gets closer, then gently call her name. "Lilly!"

"Hanako? Is that you?"

"Yes," I reply. My voice is weak and soft, as always, but there can be no mistaking me for anyone else at this point. Since it's so late, most students are in their dorm rooms, or club meetings, so chances are Lilly and I are among the only students still roaming the hallways.

"Hanako, is everything alright? What happened just now?"

"It's fine," I tell her. "Everything is okay. I just... just panicked a little."

"Why? Did something happen to you?"

"N... no. I'm just... not used to people being in... in the library."

I know my words sound false. But it's the truth. I go there for books, yes, but also because it's a quiet place to hide away. Sometimes I've wondered if my behaviour could be considered... healthy. My experiences and the trauma were enough reason for Yamaku Academy to request a therapist see me at weekends, to help me work through it all. But it hasn't helped much at all. Still, it's not as though I have no friends. I have Lilly, and Akira. And Yuuko. Even if I do keep them rather distant at times.

Lilly doesn't appear to be too happy with my explanation, though she knows I really do mean it. Nevertheless she decides not to push the topic. We go into the room and drink tea, and talk about various things. Classes, Akira's work, the school festival. I realise that I left my school bag at the library, in the rush to escape, so Lilly convinces me to return for it. I dread seeing Hisao again, but thankfully he seems to have left, so I am able to retrieve my bag without incident. I say goodbye properly to Yuuko, and head back to my dorm room with Lilly.

2. Act 1, Chapter 2: A Little Crash

Act 1 – Chapter Two: A Little Crash

The next day, I'm worried enough about seeing Hisao in class that I put off getting up for another ten minutes. Unfortunately, this is enough to make me late. No matter. Mutou-sensei is understanding enough of my circumstances to grant me leeway even on tardiness, so nothing is said when I turn up ten minutes late to class. As I take my seat I notice Hisao looking at me, the only one in the room to even bother, but despite my embarrassment I keep my nerve, and maintain a stoic expression until I sit down. No sooner have I done so than Mutou tells the class we are to be working in groups once again. Normally this would be my chance to leave, but I look across at the teacher and catch his eye. He gives me a brief nod, but even so I feel it would be a waste of time to just go now, so I remain. Instead of working with a group I can simply attempt the assigned problems by myself.

I do look up on occasion though, to see how everyone else is doing. People's reactions give me a clue on how hard the work may be. Some are sitting with their heads down, deep in thought, but across the row from me one boy looks prepared to throw his pen in frustration, while another pair at the front corner of the class are simply staring at the wall, doodling absent-mindedly, as though they can't be bothered to even attempt the problems. As I observe people, I overhear snippets of a conversation between Hisao and Misha. That is to say, I hear snippets of Hisao, since Misha's every word can likely be heard from the very next room. Hisao seems concerned for me, wondering why I so often work alone, or leave at the very mention of group tasks. I am genuinely unsure whether to be flattered that he would care despite not knowing me at all, or if I should feel hurt that he would wish me treated as a fragile package to be nurtured by those around her. Misha's response is as I expected it to be. She seems to be telling Hisao why I can't work with her or Shizune, but she isn't giving him the full details. I suppose it really comes down to Lilly and Shizune. Which would make me guilty by association, though guilty of what I can never tell.

By the time the bell rings for lunch I have finished my work, and begin to review my notes from the previous class. There's not much for me to catch up on, since I tend to work in the evenings to make up for the time I spend outside the classroom. Everyone else begins talking, taking out lunchboxes, rearranging desks, and generally acting rather loud. I ignore them, and they ignore me. Except for one person. I notice Hisao watching me, and suddenly I can no longer concentrate. As he watches I find myself unable to even turn a single page. It doesn't matter though, since soon Lilly will arrive. Before she does, however, Hisao walks up to me.

I freeze, worried about what he will say. I make no sign that I have noticed him, but still he speaks to me.

"Um, hey there, Hanako."

I look up at him and see him smiling, very nervously. I still feel nervous, but am able to unfreeze long enough to reply, "H... Hisao?"

"Hey... I just wanted to apologise for yesterday. I didn't mean to startle you or anything. I'm just new here and thought I should get to know my classmates."

His words are enough to make me smile. I can understand how he feels, but unlike him I have never had the urge to get to know everyone. Openness among people is all well and good, but in return for baring themselves, others expect to know more about you as well. I simply couldn't face it. Hisao's naïve innocence is charming though.

I notice him looking at my scars again, but this time I can't feel any fear. Hisao strikes me as someone who genuinely doesn't care about my deformity. He can't help but notice, and can't help but stare, but that's the same reaction I get from everybody. He's different to others, though, in that my scars don't repulse him. He looks at them and doesn't recoil in horror, doesn't turn away or treat me badly because of how I look. He doesn't stare. Instead he seems to treat them as a point of interest, but nothing to get worked up about. It's hard to describe, but with Hisao I don't feel as nervous as I did before. What I've seen, and what I feel I noticed when he wasn't

aware, suggests to me that he isn't so shallow as to judge me based on my scars. It makes me happy, but to be honest, it also scares me a little.

"T... that's okay. It... it was my fault," I stammer.

"Nah, that wasn't anyone's 'fault', it just kind of happened." Hisao doesn't blame me. I wish I could feel the same way. After everything I almost feel embarrassed at myself, so it feels odd that Hisao can just ignore what happened in the library and move on so easily. It's another way we're different, I guess. I have a hard time moving on from things. Evidently, he doesn't.

"So, are you waiting for someone?" Hisao asks. "I saw you looking at the door before..."

"Y... yes. Lilly."

"Oh, you mean Lilly the blind girl?" Hisao's response jars me. Maybe I was quick to judge him as being so lenient, given the way he describes Lilly. I nod in reply, annoyed at the way he so casually commented on my friend's condition. But then again, he did treat me kindly despite my appearance. It is hard coming here at first, something everyone at Yamaku can surely agree with. Since everyone has some sort of disability, and most of us don't come from places where such traits are considered normal, it is very easy to slip into the habit of referring to people by their condition. I was never able to get over that, in all my self-consciousness. Being new, maybe I can cut Hisao some slack.

Perhaps he realised his faux pas, as he continues. "She seems like a nice girl. Are you two friends?"

I accept the unspoken apology on Lilly's behalf, and reply, "Y... yes." I begin to feel the same sense of nervousness I felt in the library yesterday. The conversation is getting somewhat awkward, and frankly I start to feel naked to his words. While on the one hand I am happy to be talking to Hisao, without any open prejudice on his part, I also feel uncomfortable

being alone. I could use some support, and instinctively I look over my shoulder to the door to see if Lilly has arrived yet.

Clearly Hisao noticed my rather obvious reaction. "I hope I'm not disturbing you right now..."

"N... no, that's not it," I comment. "It's just easier if Lilly doesn't come here..." I know that Hisao won't be satisfied with that answer, but like my words to Lilly last night, they are no less true, for all the relevance (or lack of) to the conversation. I know how Shizune is likely to react to Lilly's presence, and if possible I'd rather not be caught up in that. Before I can explain, however, Hisao comes up with his own conclusion.

"Oh, because it's hard to get around the classroom?"

"Not... really." I look across at Shizune, hoping that Hisao will get the point. It's not my place to tell him for definite the nature of Shizune's and Lilly's feud, but I consider that his conversation with Misha earlier may have given at least a hint of the situation between them.

"Shizune?" he queries. I nod in reply. "What about her? Don't they get along?" I shake my head. With any luck he'll realise that I can't talk about it. It's not that I don't want to, but rather, I can't really make any sort of comment on it. It's not my business, after all. Fortunately, Hisao seems to recognise this, and moves on from the topic. He even notices the door open before I do.

"Oh, she's here now."

I quickly turn and see Lilly at the front of the classroom. Glad to finally be able to leave without causing offence, I walk across to her. I don't mean that I don't want to continue speaking with Hisao. It's nice that he's making some effort, and it's nice that I can actually talk to someone other than Lilly or Yuuko for once. But I have my limits, and there seems to be so very little that I can talk about these days. Ever since the incident, I've not been much of a conversationalist.

"Lilly..." I say to her.

"Ah, Hanako. Good morning. Is the president here?" It's clear who she's referring to, something even Hisao can easily pick up on.

"Y... yes." I glance across once more at Shizune, even though I'm aware Lilly can't see me do so. It's more for Hisao's benefit than hers, though. Lilly seems eager to be off, in any case. The sooner we leave, the less chance of a confrontation. I've seen them argue in the past, with Misha acting as an unwilling conduit. It's never a pretty sight. They clash enough during official business, what with Lilly being her class representative and Shizune being student council president. With the festival coming up, there's likely to be more reason for them to butt heads, and as far as I'm concerned we're all better off out of it.

Apparently Lilly feels the same. "I suppose we'd best be off, then," she says, with a sigh and a raised eyebrow that aren't lost on Hisao. He looks across at Shizune again, then back to Lilly, but to my relief he doesn't press the subject. I wonder what he thinks of the situation? Every school has its cliques and groups, after all. I'd imagine things were much the same at his previous school, but it's not something a newcomer would expect at Yamaku. It threw me a little too when I first arrived, but I've since had time to grow used to it. Of course, I wouldn't be counted as part of any such clique. Perhaps Lilly and myself could be considered one all on our own.

"Hey, Lilly," says Hisao. "How are things? I'm sorry I made you run off yesterday." Of course, Lilly and Hisao must have spoken after I fled the library the previous evening. She would have no doubt asked him what had happened before trying to find me. It's only when Lilly replies that I remember she had no way of knowing he was here as well.

"Oh my, is that Hisao? I didn't realize you were here..." She looks slightly embarrassed. It's not often I do this, but I feel almost obliged to come to her rescue. Usually it's the other way around.

"S-sorry Lilly. I thought you realized..."

Even then, she recovers quickly. "No, it's alright, Hanako. Hisao, please don't worry about yesterday. It was just a misunderstanding."

Hisao seems almost unsure of himself with this. As though he's been caught flat-footed in the discussion. "If... you say so. I'm still working this place out."

"Well then, I think you'll find most people here a lot more forgiving than elsewhere." It's the same thing Lilly has said to me so often, but I've never been quite able to take her words on board. Again, I think of cliques and groups within Yamaku, and how out-of-place I am with any of them. "If you are feeling a little confused, please don't be afraid to ask questions."

"Sure. I'll remember that." Hisao, on the other hand, follows her meaning easily.

"Um... Lilly..." As fascinating as all this interaction is, I still feel uneasy around everyone else, and in the corner of my eye I notice Shizune surreptitiously glancing every few seconds. It's simply a matter of time before she finds some excuse to come over and drag Misha along for yet another verbal spar.

Lilly nods, recognising my voice and meaning even if she can't see what I see. "I'm sorry Hisao," she says, "but we must be off." Even I can see she hasn't fully recovered from Hisao bringing up the events of yesterday, and my own discomfort must be obvious to anyone looking. But Hisao clearly doesn't want to be on his own with Shizune and Misha – something I can certainly understand.

"Mind if I accompany you two?" I'm not entirely sure what to think, so I look across to Lilly. A hint of a smile is present on her lips, a slight humming sound escaping her mouth.

"I'm sure that we could accommodate you, can't we, Hanako?"

Damn her. Leaving the decision down to me. I know that she's doing this for a very good reason, attempting to give me more self-assertion and

confidence. But I know that my problem isn't a lack of confidence in general. Rather, I feel almost resentful at times, of the way I appear to everyone else. How they change their own behaviour to accommodate me. It isn't enough that they see me as different, they have to draw attention to that fact without even meaning to, and it doesn't help me in dealing with the issues that surround my own self. Nevertheless, I'm in that scenario now, having to make this choice. Hisao seems like a good person, and everything he's done so far screams of effort and a genuine attempt to see me as someone normal. In the end, the chance to actually make a friend, unconditionally, wins out over my usual fears and worries.

"S... sure."

Lilly smiles at me, almost as if I'd passed some kind of test. Knowing her, perhaps it was. A test of my own ability to make an important decision. A test of confidence. If only she could move on and let me show my true self without needing these silly games. But Lilly will always be Lilly.

"Well then," she says, "shall we go?"

I still have a look on my face, like a rabbit caught in headlights, but there's no way Lilly could pick up on that without either myself or Hisao saying anything. He doesn't, and I certainly won't, so the matter is settled. We quickly leave, before Shizune can accost us. I see her watching us as we pass through the open doorway, but she makes no attempt to stop us. A narrow escape, it seems.

Lilly takes her usual position in the corridor, walking by the wall so her cane can tap against it and alert her to her rough position. I still feel uneasy, enough that I find myself unconsciously staying close to Lilly, almost hugging her as we walk. It would be easy for her to make comment, but she says nothing. Turning the corner, I suddenly witness a pink blob speeding towards us. Before I can focus, the blur of colour hit Hisao with full force, knocking him to the ground.

"Ouch," I hear from the floor. It's not certain who said it, but I let out a small high-pitched scream before I can fully observe the scene before me.

Emi. Of course. Dressed in her track kit, I've seen her cause more than a few accidents inside Yamaku's hallways, to the point that it's a small miracle no-one has ever been seriously hurt. Looking at Hisao, though, he seems to be breathing much more rapidly. He stares for a few seconds at her running blades, thrown by her speed despite her lack of legs – most people have the same reaction (I certainly did, the first time I saw her run). As Emi begins gets up, Hisao winces a little, still on the floor. It looks like he's in pain. Before I can say anything, though I'm unsure of what to say exactly, Emi starts to speak.

"Aw, man... hey, are you alright? I'm sorry about that, really! I wasn't looking where I was going, and you just came out of nowhere. Sorry... sorry!"

Emi has a way of speaking that borders on hyperactive. She's the complete opposite of me, feisty and bubbly, with a fondness for life that makes her an instant joy to be around. I've never quite been able to talk to her much, but in conversation she usually makes up for that with few problems. I certainly like her, to be sure, but we could never really be friends. We're just too different. She is nice though, and she seems truly apologetic. The look on her face is almost like a puppy dog, eyes wide and a slight frown gently marring her features. Apparently Hisao has already picked up on that.

"It's okay, don't worry about it... ouch..."

I'm not the only one to have noticed Hisao is hurting. Lilly is puzzled, wondering why I stopped so suddenly, unsure of what is going on. She hasn't quite put two and two together based on what she heard yet. But Emi's puppy dog look has been replaced by one of concern, turning more serious when Hisao rubs his chest and frowns.

"Hey, should I get a nurse?" Her voice has risen to an even higher pitch than usual, which is quite an achievement. Hisao stares at her for a few seconds before replying. I also stare, but at Hisao, who rubs his chest again. I can't speak, though I'm as worried as Emi. Upon witnessing how serious things could be, I have simply frozen out of fear. I still have no idea what Hisao's

problem could be that brought him to Yamaku, but seeing the way his hand is touching his chest and the pain he is clearly in gives me a few ideas.

"Err... no need, I'm fine", he says, downplaying the problem. He pulls himself to a sitting position, feeling his chest again, and sighs. Emi echoes my own concern.

"You sure you're okay? I hit you pretty hard."

"It's okay," comes the reply. "I said I was fine, and nothing's broken. No harm done."

Emi seems convinced, but I'm not. Hisao has to have some reason for being here, and there's nothing outwardly wrong with him. Clearly his problem is something to do with his chest, which would mean he isn't alright, not by a long shot. But I find myself unable to say anything.

"That's good!" Emi is relieved at Hisao's apparent sudden recovery. "I was..."

Before Emi can finish speaking, Lilly has finally realized something is wrong. "Hisao, what happened?"

"Someone just bumped into me, nothing serious. Just winded." I feel somewhat annoyed at his determination to deny anything is the matter.

"Er, sorry," says Emi, returning to the previous puppy dog look. "I was just going to get some stuff, and I was in kind of a hurry."

Lilly recognises the voice. "That 'someone' here is Emi, isn't it?" Emi coughs and looks rather sheepish.

"Hi, Lilly, Hanako."

"Do please try to be more careful," Lilly tells her. "You might be sturdy enough to endure these sorts of accidents, but there are people who aren't."

A big understatement at this school. Especially given the figure still sitting on the ground in front of me. By this point I feel almost ready to speak again, but with Lilly giving Emi the usual lecture there's not much call for me to interject. Emi blushes a little and starts to fidget, embarrassed at what has happened. I look at Hisao to see if he's alright now, and notice a smile on his face as he watches Emi's reaction to Lilly's stern telling-off.

"I know that! I – I, um, I was just... Aaah! I gotta go! Teacher'll have my head, I promised to help with printouts but I went running instead! Sorry, but I've gotta change and everything!"

Emi starts to babble again at high speed, running off at a speed not so much slower than her previous blob-like state. I look to see Lilly's reaction, but of course she can't see. She does frown, however, noticing how quickly Emi's voice fades away down the corridor. Hisao is still on the floor, but pulls himself to his feet.

"Does that kind of thing happen often around here?"

Lilly takes the stand on this one. "There are more rules in Yamaku than usual for running in corridors... but that rarely stops Emi, it seems." She shakes her head briefly, but there is a clear smile on her face. I'm sure Hisao doesn't need to be told why the rules are so strict for running here. But again, Emi doesn't seem to be one to follow them in general. This is hardly her first offence, after all. "I don't think there's anything we can do to stop her, I'm afraid. Shall we be off, then?"

Lilly continues walking, back the way we were originally headed, and I follow behind her. Hisao pauses briefly, but soon hurries in my wake. We reach the tea room with no further incident.

3. Act 1, Chapter 3: Debate & Confrontation

Act 1 – Chapter Three: Debate and Confrontation

As we sit down in the tea room, Lilly and I begin the process of making lunch. I had only expected there to be two of us, so some adjustments are required in the amount everyone has to eat, but this is of little concern as Lilly starts to make the tea. I get out the lunchboxes we had previously packed, setting out food for three.

"So," Hisao asks, "is this what you meant by coming here almost every day?"

"Yes, Hanako and I usually have lunch here." Lilly replies. "It suits both of us, so we ended up using this room regularly."

Hisao looks briefly towards me, and I can guess what must be going through his mind. It's much easier for me to eat here than in the cafeteria, surrounded by people. And Lilly is always beset with issues and matters relating to being a student rep – it gives her a much-needed break being away from everyone else. I have no such requirements of her time, so eating together gives us both a rest. Hisao sits down after the tea has been poured, taking the seat next to mine. I almost shy away at his closeness, but just about keep myself in check. I have the chance to make a new friend here, and showing my potential weakness will help no-one. I want them to see me as a strong individual, after all, and flinching at someone simply sitting by me will hardly do anything to aid that. I try to relax, smile slightly at Hisao, and start to eat.

Lilly is the first to break the silence. "So, how are you faring in Yamaku, Hisao? You seemed a bit flustered before."

What a way for her to avoid the topic of her own embarrassment from earlier. With not noticing Hisao and with her failing to realise sooner what had happened during the incident with Emi, Lilly is still feeling rather uncertain of herself. Definitely not like her. Bringing up Hisao's own uncertainty is a great way for her to deflect attention from herself, while

also getting a chance to learn more about the newcomer and make him more at ease in Yamaku itself. Hisao takes in stride regardless.

"Apart from getting lost every now and again, and being crash-tackled outside my classroom? Fine, I guess..."

I can't help but speak up here. I do still worry about Hisao after being nearly knocked out by the speeding bullet that is Emi. "You... you looked pretty hurt before. Are you really... okay?"

Something flickers on Hisao's face for the briefest of moments, before it returns to a normal expression once more. It's enough to confirm for me that something is wrong, or was wrong at any rate, and that his condition has something to do with it. He refrains from giving details though, refusing to say exactly what his condition is.

"Yeah, it's nothing. I was just a bit startled."

I certainly don't believe it. I steal a look at Lilly, and she doesn't seem to agree either. Neither of us are stupid. We know when someone isn't being completely straight with us. But I don't want to drive Hisao to tell us something he clearly doesn't want to discuss - I can sympathise with him enough there. Lilly, too, chooses not to push the subject. There's too much pain down that road. Everyone here has their own tale to tell, whether it be something like my own story, or simply mundane – Lilly's blindness from birth, for example. Whether we choose to tell our tales is something for each individual to decide. Privacy is paramount here at Yamaku.

"So, uh..." Hisao starts. "How long have you been in this school? You both seem to know your way around pretty well."

"Hmm... well, I've been here since the start of high school, but only moved into the dormitories a year ago." Lilly would have started here early, of course, since her blindness wasn't a recent thing. Anything to make life a little bit easier. "Hanako joined at the start of high school as well, and moved to the dormitories when she did, if memory serves me right."

"That's right," I confirm. "Since... high school." It would have been too difficult for me to spend even the smallest amount of time in a regular high school. Too many questions, too many people staring. Too much abuse.

Hisao continues the conversation, clearly curious to know more about us. "So you've known each other since then?"

"Since I moved, yes," says Lilly. "Hanako lives next door to me, so it's only natural, right?"

She looks at me to confirm what she is saying. "R-right."

"Yeah, of course," Hisao says. That isn't the full story, and Hisao looks at me as if to say he knows the real reason. Lilly wasn't the first person to take a room next to me, but the others weren't blind. They could still see my scars. And I could still see the distance they kept.

The conversation ends rather abruptly. There's not really much more to talk about at this point. We continue eating in silence.

The bell sounds for the end of lunch, and Lilly and I clear away our lunches.

"I guess we'd better be off," Lilly says. "Are you going to go with Hisao, Hanako?"

My first reaction is to say no. I may not mind Hisao's company so much, but being alone with him on the walk to Mutou-sensei's class is too much for me right now. Too much awkwardness. I even think of perhaps skipping this class to avoid walking with Hisao. But that wouldn't benefit anyone, and the slight hint of a smile on Lilly's face is enough to convince me otherwise. I voice my consent in a small voice.

"Y-yes."

Hisao has a hint of concern in his voice, but I feel compelled to brush it aside. I've made my decision. "We should hurry then. Class has already started by the sound of it." We leave together quickly, and say our goodbyes to Lilly as she nods towards us, reaching down for her cane. She hurries after us though, and turns to Hisao to speak before entering her own classroom.

"Hisao, thank you for sharing lunch with us today."

"My pleasure, Lilly," he replies. With the formalities over, Lilly disappears into her class, leaving Hisao and I standing together in the corridor. I still feel nervous, and reconsider the idea of skipping to spend an afternoon in the library.

Apparently Hisao has picked up on that. "So, do you really want to go back to class now?"

I have to stay strong! I have to maintain my resolve. "Y-yes."

"Okay then," Hisao says. There is another awkward silence. Eager to avoid any further discussion, he opens the rear door of the classroom. I follow him into the room to see Mutou-sensei looking at Hisao with the start of a lecture on his lips. However, the instant he sees me, whatever he was about to say is lost, and he keeps quiet while nodding at us both. I wonder what could be going through his mind right now? Or through the minds of our fellow classmates. Hisao looks back at me, but doesn't say a word. His eyes flicker toward the desks where Shizune and Misha usually sit. They're empty. Yet Mutou doesn't seem to have any objection there, either. At least, none that has been so far articulated. The class continues. I sit down and try to work as much as possible.

The next day is routine as always. I wake, I wash, I dress, I head to class. What follows isn't quite as routine, however. I am about to enter Mutou's classroom, early for once, when I hear raised voices. I didn't plan to be quite so early, but I already owed Mutou-sensei some work, and if I handed it in

with enough time to spare I could always spend the first period in the library again. The voices are familiar. One in particular.

"Today! The deadline is today! You're certainly taking your time, aren't you..."

Misha, of course. I decide to listen for a short while, though half of what is being said is just about inaudible to my ears through the door. Clearly Lilly's managed to catch Misha, and Shizune, at the wrong time, and is now paying the price for it. I'm somewhat surprised though, not to mention intrigued, to hear another voice.

"Hey, Shizune, aren't you being a little too hard on her? There's still a whole day left."

I didn't expect to hear Hisao's voice crop up here, but it takes a back seat in my mind. As I listen I hear the conversation devolve into a full-on confrontation between Lilly and Shizune. With Misha's voice, of course. I've grown rather good at reading between Misha's lines, even when I can't actually see her as she talks. Or yells. It sounds like Lilly is becoming more agitated, while Shizune is thriving in the atmosphere that no doubt permeates the room. I can just imagine the grin spread across Shizune's face, that Lilly can't see. It makes me angry on Lilly's behalf, but I know better than to go in and join the conflict. Much better to sit this one out.

"Are you accusing me of slacking off?" says Misha, on Shizune's behalf. "It seems like you're confusing me with yourself..."

"I don't think so," comes the reply. "That would be a very difficult thing for me to do, comparing myself to you."

"You're right, the difference between us is like heaven and hell."

"And it's not hard to guess which one you might represent." A harsh sentiment, but no less accurate coming from Lilly's lips. It's enough to keep even Misha silent for a brief moment.

"Hicchan! Don't you slack off either..." Misha comments, clearly an attempt by Shizune to restore her control of the argument. A vain hope, as Lilly's barbed comeback has ruffled her feathers more than a little.

"What are you talking about?" He seems very out of his depth.

"Aren't you taking part in the festival, Hicchan? You are, aren't you? Then! I hope you're going to do a lot more to make sure it goes smoothly than this person!"

"Hey, I'm the new guy, remember? It's not like I could've done much, even if I'd wanted..." Hisao jumps on the defensive.

"That's right," comes the added boost from Lilly, "you shouldn't expect a transfer student to jump right into it on his first week."

Hisao's next comment is more than enough to add to my faith in him, as well as give more light to Lilly's newly found confidence against Shizune. "Yeah, you're being unreasonable with us both."

I smile at this. Despite all the reservations I had about Hisao, I can see that he does care, and my respect for him grows immensely. He doesn't simply defend himself, but comes to Lilly's aid as well, presenting a united front against Shizune's pressure. When Misha next speaks for Shizune, she sounds audibly defeated, as though there is little either can do to salvage the situation in their benefit.

"Excuses, excuses. Miss Class Rep has had plenty of time to deal with her report. And we repeatedly offered you a position to help with the student council work, but you refused to commit yourself to making the festival a success."

Shizune and Misha are simply repeating the same arguments as before, as if they hope that shouting loudly enough (how ironic) will be enough for them to 'win'. Hisao notices this too, and refuses to let them trap him in an ever recycling debate.

"Yeah, but as I said back then, I'm not sure if... Whatever. Forget it."

It's clear that the discussion is over. Before I am caught eavesdropping, I swiftly turn on my heel and walk away, heading towards the tea room. I don't return to class, but it's a close call. I had already made plans to catch up later, and there's no way I feel strong enough today to face my classmates, but I would love to see Shizune's face after her defeat this morning...

4. Act 1, Chapter 4: Breaking Borders

Act 1 – Chapter Four: Breaking Borders

I don't spend the entire day away from class, of course. Although I may be good at playing catch-up, I still need to attend most of the time. I almost regret turning up to the classroom this afternoon, however, when I open the door to find the shrill high pitch of Misha greeting me.

"Oh? Hello..." She quickly realises who I am... "Hey! Playing delinquent again?"

I blush in response. I'm not entirely certain of what to say now, and back away slowly around the door as Shizune closes in. She makes a quick gesture to Misha, as my head disappears and only my fingers remain, curled around the open frame. I've never been entirely comfortable around Shizune, mainly with my shyness and her aloofness. My close friendship with Lilly hardly helps, either. But before Misha can translate, Hisao comments.

"What is it, Hanako?"

I reply directly to him, refusing to acknowledge the two girls staring at my hand on the door edge. "H... has Lilly been here?" It isn't Hisao who speaks though, but Misha.

"Sorry, haven't seen Satou. She, eh, came by in the morning though."

I continue to watch Shizune, keeping an eye on her, but try not to react to what Misha has just told me. They don't know that I heard the confrontation this morning, and it would do me no favours to reveal it now. Misha seems kind of embarrassed though, understandable with Hisao right next to her. Shizune stares back at me, refusing to budge even a little. I wonder what could be going through her mind. She can't possibly suspect me of eavesdropping, she couldn't have heard me, let alone seen me outside the room. No, I believe she simply wants to intimidate me. I feel terrified, of

course, but I won't let her beat me here. I maintain eye contact, refusing to break, while asking Misha for more details.

"Do... do you know where she is?"

Shizune signs to Misha, meeting my continuing challenge.

"If she has any sense in her head," comes the translation, "she's in her classroom, working on their festival project. But who knows where that woman is loitering at." It's clearly a direct attack from Shizune, trying to reassert her own dominance. Maybe she still feels put out from her defeat to Lilly and Hisao earlier in the day? Or perhaps she just wants to show me that she is the superior person here. It doesn't work.

"You need to find her?" says Hisao. "She was looking for you in the morning but I guess you missed each other." I was rather surprised, to tell the truth, that she didn't come to my usual haunts this morning. Maybe she was too busy after all, but I didn't see her at the tea room, nor in the library when I retreated there for the rest of the period. Yuuko hadn't seen her either. Curious. I pause, thinking on this, when I realise that Hisao asked me a question, and I haven't yet replied.

"Y... yeah."

"I can come with you," he offers. "If it's okay." I would honestly rather go alone, but Hisao's gesture catches me off guard yet again. Besides, he can always stay here. With the Student Council. I decide to save him, nodding furiously at his suggestion. Even then, he looks uneasy, as though he's afraid of doing or saying something to drive me away or make me more scared.

"It's dinnertime soon. Were you planning to eat with Lilly?" I nod again, more gently this time. I had tried looking for Lilly in the cafeteria, but too many people were present. I try to avoid the room anyway at the best of times, if only to avoid being judged. Hisao picks up his bag and we leave Shizune's glare and Misha's mild grin behind.

He walks quickly. I have to almost run to keep up, but Hisao notices and slows a little. I feel more at ease now that Shizune isn't here trying to provoke a fight. It's odd, I've never experienced anything like this before. It feels... normal. Walking with a boy. I still keep my distance, though. We aren't quite that close yet. I'm really not sure what to make of Hisao, except that... I trust him.

We reach the cafeteria, but Lilly isn't there. I bow my head, and Hisao picks up on that almost immediately.

"Have you looked somewhere else already?"

"J-just at the library... I was reading..."

Hardly a comprehensive effort. "Ah, so not exactly a thorough search then. Well, if I had to guess, she'd be in her own class like Shizune said, right?"

I guess so. "R-right." I nod yet again, nearly imperceptible, and the silence descends once more.

Hisao breaks it again. It's like he's trying to do everything possible to keep me talking, to make me more at ease with him. Forcing issues isn't the best way for me to deal with them, but he doesn't know that – he's known me for less than a week. I try to humour him as much as I reasonably can, at least for now.

"So you and Lilly usually hang out together after class, right?" he asks.

"Y-yes." Did he really expect me to give more than that?

"Must be a pain being in different classes, I'm guessing." I nod again quickly.

"Lilly... comes by the classroom, though. Even when she's busy..." I really do appreciate it, and can't help but smile a little at her actions. Hisao smiles back briefly. I wonder what he's thinking right now?

We leave the cafeteria and head upstairs, towards Lilly's classroom. Other students pass us on the way, but I keep my head down and face hidden. I instinctively move behind Hisao, before realising what it is I'm doing.

"Hey, are you alright?" he says, a look of concern on his face. I don't want to discuss it with him.

"J-just keep going..." We carry on, and after passing the students I move back to Hisao's side, but whatever good cheer I had gained from the last discussion is gone. I stay tense, head still lowered, never getting closer than an arm's length to Hisao. We continue in silence.

Nevertheless, even that is broken again soon, as we get closer to Lilly's classroom and hear the noise coming from within. "Well," Hisao says, "I guess we found her." Truth be told, I'd expected this. But I didn't want to say anything, and if necessary I'd have simply stayed in the library for a while longer. But Hisao was willing to come with me, and the backup was useful. At least I have someone I can trust, no matter how little, to help me cope with everyone. Then again, this is a class for blind people. Much easier for me to deal with when no-one can see my scars.

On the edge of hearing Lilly's voice is audible, though I can't make out what she is saying. Probably instructions of a kind, taking charge of the situation in her class. I slowly edge behind Hisao, hoping against hope that he doesn't notice, or doesn't care too much. He opens the door, and I peer in over his shoulder, seeing a throng of people sitting, standing, kneeling over banners, mixing paints, talking excitedly about the projects they have for the school festival. Canes are swung around as some expertly side-step paint cans on the floor, everyone having found a way of dealing with their condition. If only it was as easy for me!

Lilly stands at the front of the class, three or four students surrounding her. We walk over to her, me behind Hisao attempting to stay out of everyone's way, but feeling less nervous than I thought I would. Hisao greets her as we draw close, inadvertently interrupting a smaller girl who is busy chattering away to Lilly about the arrangements for the class stall.

"Hi, Lilly."

She positions her head up, confused for a moment and not recognising Hisao's voice. "Sorry, who..."

"Ah, sorry. Hisao. I have Hanako too." It's good of him to introduce me, rather than leaving it to me to alert Lilly to my presence.

"H-hi," I say. Lilly turns her head in my direction and frowns slightly. Maybe she thinks I won't be able to handle being among so many people, when in reality I'm doing much better than usual. The fact that everyone here is blind, or partially blind, is the main reason for that. Still, she decides to take things slowly for my benefit, and turns back towards the girl who had previously been talking to her.

"For the moment, just ask Moriya for his advice. Kenji's busy with painting one of the banners already."

The girl turns away, nodding, and skips in the opposite direction, using the wall to guide her. I steal a glance at Hisao and notice an odd look on his face. It seems like a sign of recognition – does he know her? Or this Moriya, or Kenji? I have briefly spoken to some of Lilly's classmates in the past myself, usually when I've been waiting here for her, but neither name jumps out at me. And I didn't recognise the small girl who just left. Hisao seems to know someone here though, as he looks over my shoulder and behind me. I turn my face to see where he's looking and see the girl talking to a boy with glasses and a scarf (a scarf indoors? Really?) hunched over a large sheet and some paint on the floor. Given what Lilly just said to her, I would assume that's Kenji. I turn back to Lilly as she continues to speak.

"Sorry about that. Our class doesn't have many students with even partial eyesight, so they're in high demand."

Hisao doesn't surprise me much with his next words. "Need a hand? I could give you some help if you need some. Maybe Hanako could too."

I would certainly like that, and I nod strongly to confirm that sentiment. It would be nice to actually do something with people, for a change, and maybe it would be good for me to do so. Lilly could use the help too, and maybe a chance to bond a little more with Hisao wouldn't be such a bad thing. I could never do something like this in my own class, or most others for that matter, but here I don't feel as judged. I'd love to help the blind class on their project for the festival.

Lilly sighs, evidently pleased. Of course, she couldn't see me nod, but no doubt she can tell that I'm happy to be involved. I would have made some comment, however small, if I wasn't. And Shizune can't complain at either Hisao nor myself now.

"Ah, that's good. This might actually get finished before everyone goes off to dinner, now." Lilly sounds relieved. "Would you be able to help the person painting the main banner? It's a big task for him to do, but nobody else can help."

"Kenji?" Hisao replies. "Sure." I was right then, the boy in the corner is Kenji, and Hisao does know him. Lilly is apparently surprised by this, and I have to admit I'm also curious to find out how they know each other.

"I take it you've met?" Lilly asks.

"Our rooms in the dorm are right next to each other," comes the reply. "Hard to miss each other, really."

How obvious could that answer have been? It makes so much sense, and I missed it completely. Ah well, at least I wasn't the only one. "Well, it's good to see you're getting friends so fast," says Lilly. I look at Hisao's face again and an odd gesture appears for the briefest of moments at the word 'friend'. Maybe that's hardly the right word for Lilly to use? I don't know, maybe I'll witness a little more when we start working with this Kenji guy on his banner. Hisao speaks up and brings the conversation back to the topic at hand.

"We'll go help him then. He knows what needs doing, right?"

"That's right. Just ask if you have any problems."

Hisao and I both voice our agreement and make our way to the corner where Kenji is kneeling. His eyes are fixed on the rectangle of white on the floor ahead. Hisao greets him as we get closer.

"Hey, Kenji."

Silence. Did he even hear us approach, or Hisao say hello? Or is he ignoring us?

"Kenji?"

Suddenly, Kenji rises sharply, paint dripping from his brush into the pot by his side. "Huh? What? Who is it?" How sharp and abrupt. Not to mention rather rude. And people wonder why I find it hard talking to new faces...

"It's me. Hisao. From the..."

"Right, right, I know that, man. What're you doing here, though?" Worse and worse. Not the best first impression, even if I do feel a very small bit more relaxed in this room. I decide to edge a little out of Hisao's shadow, though, if only for the sake of asserting my actual presence here. I may be the type to hide behind others, but I don't like being a third wheel. Hisao jumps on this as a chance to explain our being here.

"I was just going to help with the banner. Hanako and I, that is."

"H... hello..." I stutter.

"Oh. Er, hey. I guess that's okay." Kenji seems put out a little, but weirdly enough he also seems to calm down just a bit when he notices me. It's actually quite creepy, and I consider just walking away, but think better of it. Still. Creepy.

We all sit down again, Hisao and I on one side of the banner and Kenji directly opposite. I read the kanji that's half painted on the cloth – Class 3-2

Noodle Stall. Looks like Hisao was reading it as well.

"You guys selling noodles at the festival on Sunday?"

"Yeah," Kenji says. "Some stalls outside. Or something." I wonder at his words. 'Or something'? Does he even intend to bother going to the festival? That being said, I can hardly comment. I may be willing to help, but I won't be attending either. Does anyone really expect me to, with so many people being there?

Hisao returns us to the task at hand. "So, how do you want to split this? We do borders while you do the text? Or do you want to switch and do the borders?" He looks sideways at me and I wonder what his thoughts are. I'm not fussed myself, text or borders are both fine by me.

"Text is mine," comes the response. "You do borders." How abrupt again. He sounds very determined that no-one else should do the text. Ah well. I pick up a brush and try to decide which colours would look prettiest – it's nice to have some work to busy my mind. As Hisao starts to paint, I am already in the middle of a pattern of some kind, I haven't quite figured out yet. It looks nice, though.

As I paint, I surreptitiously glance upwards on occasion. I may not take an active part in discussions in general, but that doesn't mean I don't listen. One can pick up an awful lot by simply listening. And I'm good at not drawing attention to myself. I notice Kenji lean in towards Hisao and whisper, as if his words are not for my ears. I can still hear every word, though. Having to listen to Mutou-sensei over Misha in class has developed my hearing at least a small amount, but it's enough.

"Okay, man, why're you here?"

"Hanako just wanted some help to find Lilly, that's all."

Kenji frowns at this. "I get it. It looks like I misjudged you."

Curiouser and curiouser. What could he mean by that? I continue my painting and act oblivious, but I'm interested now.

"You're infiltrating them, aren't you? Going deep undercover?" What the hell is Kenji talking about? The look on Hisao's face is the same as I feel. I hide my own look of confusion, acting as though I'm unaware of the discussion taking place.

"Is that why you're here?" Hisao humours him.

"Obviously. It sucks, but there's no better way to get intel than going in yourself." Intel? On what? "We gotta stick together, man. This is a harsh school, a harsh world." Probably the only thing I've heard from Kenji that makes any sense at all.

Apparently Hisao agrees. "Yes, very harsh."

Silence falls again as we all settle back to our work. I am left to wonder what I just witnessed, and decide to put it out of my head for now. Clearly this Kenji fellow has a severe mental quirk of some kind. I forget him briefly and return to the pattern I was working on.

"Finished," I say, before the others. The border is all done, a very pretty piece of work too.

"Looks like I am too," says Hisao. "Good job." I feel pleased at the praise for my work, and see that Hisao has essentially copied my design in an attempt to maintain symmetry as much as possible. Ironical to some extent, but beautiful penmanship. With the last lines connected the banner is nearly complete.

Hisao pulls himself up and looks around the classroom. I look too and see that most of the class has gone – Kenji remains working on another banner, while Lilly is still talking and coordinating the efforts of a few stragglers.

"Need a hand?" Hisao offers his hand to me, which I take gracefully, and helps me to my feet. My legs feel quite numb after sitting down for so long

in one position. With all the painting, I had failed to notice the pins and needles creeping along, but try to ignore them as much as possible. I know they'll soon go away. As I get up, however, I notice Hisao's eyes on my right wrist, and see the scars that extend even past my long sleeves. What could he be thinking now? I cover my wrist with my left hand, and turn my face down and slightly away, refusing to meet Hisao's eyes. His next words come as a brief shock to me.

"Looks good, doesn't it?"

I recoil briefly and my face registers a moment of surprise, until I realise he is no longer staring at me. Instead, Hisao's eyes are fixed on the banner, and I realise what he really meant.

"It does... I guess." I smile at him, more as a sign of forgiveness than an agreement, although I most certainly do agree with his sentiments on the banner. Something we can both be proud of. We cross the room again and return to Lilly. Once more, Hisao takes the lead.

"We've finished the banner. I guess that's all that needs to be done?"

Lilly nods and smiles at us both, using the direction of Hisao's voice to know where to face her head. "Thank you Hisao, Hanako. If there's any way I can thank you...?"

"It's fine," Hisao replies. "Beats sitting in my room studying, at any rate."

"I don't mind either." I feel a need to make it clear to Lilly, and to Hisao, that I was happy to be of some use today. Anything that takes my mind off things is good in my book. And it was definitely interesting, in a way, to meet Kenji. On that note...

"Oh, is Kenji still here?" Lilly asks. Before either of us can respond with the affirmative, Kenji himself shouts across the room.

"Yeah, just finished." He puts his sign onto a shelf to dry, walks towards us, and passes us heading for the door. "See ya, man."

"Bye," Hisao says. The other students still remaining do the same, saying goodbye to us before leaving. Soon, Lilly, Hisao and I are the only people left in class 3-2.

"Well, I guess that's everyone," says Hisao.

"I hope we don't have to do anything like that again." I can kind of see where Lilly is coming from, with the sheer amount of effort she has had to put in to make this project a potential success, not to mention keeping Shizune off her back.

"Working past school time?"

"Indeed. The class's plans this year were ambitious. Maybe too ambitious."

I feel a need to give my opinion here, seeing the dedication the class have clearly put towards their work this year. "The stalls look nice, though."

Hisao agrees with me. "She's right, it shows that a lot of work's gone into them."

Lilly can't see the smile on my face, but Hisao can. She must be able to sense the good cheer in both our voices though, a rarity for me, and chuckles a little as she speaks.

"My, my, I'm sure a lot of us would be glad to hear that. At least now there's not much work to do until the festival itself."

I'm certainly happy to hear all that. Still, I can't help but feel a little tired now after all the hard work we just did. The clock seems to share my point of view. Besides, I've not eaten since lunch, and I feel kind of hungry now. I can always cook a small meal in the dormitories. "Umm... it's getting pretty late. Should we go?"

"That's probably a good idea," comes the response from Lilly. "Are you going back to the dorms as well, Hisao?"

"Yeah, I guess I'll tag along." There isn't much else to do at this time, anyway.

We leave the classroom and head outside, into the Yamaku gardens. As curfew approaches we see a few students rushing around, but otherwise it's nice and quiet. Peaceful. The sun has already set, and the moonlight makes the trees look eerie, but so calm. The only sounds are our footsteps, and Lilly's cane. I hear Hisao yawn a little.

"Tired?" Lilly asks.

"Yeah. Still getting used to the flow of things, I guess. The... uh... thing with Shizune took me kind of off guard, though."

I nod a little, before realising that they still don't know I was eavesdropping. I catch myself just in time, but Hisao doesn't appear to have noticed anything, looking back at the school building, while Lilly can't have noticed me anyway. I see Hisao grit his teeth in anger, or possibly annoyance. I still regret a little that I chose to skip class today. Seeing Shizune's face and her effect on the class would have made for an interesting morning, even if I risked being caught in her wrath by association. Then again, it doesn't seem to have done Hisao too much harm today. Save the teeth, of course.

Lilly decides to respond to Hisao's comment. "Ah... about that... I'm sorry about it being so public. Shizune and I... go back some ways."

She hardly needs to remind me, but Hisao has no idea about their history. Hisao looks at me when he realises Lilly has no intention of elaborating, but it's not my place to say anything about it. Especially when one of the two subjects is present. I deliberately make my face unreadable, more so even than usual, and give Hisao no clues whatsoever. He'll have to keep wondering until Lilly agrees to explain matters to him.

"I'll be glad once the festival is over, in any case." Lilly is clearly trying to change the topic, and it works.

"I can imagine," says Hisao. "My old school's festivals were a lot more low-key than this."

"Yamaku stresses the idea of a school community," Lilly explains. "So the staff likes to make our festivals and such special occasions."

"And yet the students are the ones who do the work. What an unfair world." I laugh a little at Hisao's comment, agreeing and feeling slightly impressed by his perceptiveness. Lilly does the same, as Hisao smiles at us both. It's made more funny when we consider the previous topic, regarding Shizune. If only Hisao knew how much work she decided to take on as Student Council President, especially regarding the festival! Well, it's her own fault. As we giggle, Lilly puts on a straight face just long enough to speak again.

"I suppose coming from a strict all-girls school helped me a bit with Yamaku. Compared to there, Yamaku is much more relaxed."

We continue onwards, the sounds of laughter not quite dead but certainly fading away. Eventually we come to the steps outside the two dormitories. I look at the wall where Rin the artist, a rather eccentric girl, has been painting a mural for the festival. It looks nearly done, but in the moonlight I can only see a few details standing out. Maybe it will look much better in the day.

"See you, Lilly, Hanako."

Lilly and I each nod in acknowledgement, before leaving Hisao and entering our own dormitory. We pass the teacher on security duty tonight, and head upstairs to our rooms. I quickly eat and prepare for bed, wondering what the next day will bring...

5. Act 1, Chapter 5: Silence In The Library

Act 1 – Chapter Five: Silence In The Library

The next day passes normally. I actually decide to turn up to lessons in the morning, though I keep my head down and study hard, avoiding Shizune's gaze whenever she turns my way. After the lecture on electricity, Mutou-sensei gives a brief talk regarding the school festival, but I don't pay attention, even when Misha bursts out with her typical loud comments. Something about fried food? Never mind, it's not as though I plan to attend anyway. Too many people. As the class ends, I wait for Lilly, but catch a glimpse of a girl outside with strawberry blonde hair talking to Hisao. Looking closer, I see that it's Emi. I wonder what they're discussing? It doesn't matter anyway, as they soon leave. Given the time of day, I would assume perhaps they intend to eat lunch together. It's not long before Lilly turns up, and we walk to the tea room together, chatting quietly as we go.

Classes end, and I retreat to my regular spot. The beanbags are free, as always, and I settle down with a pile of books, happy to be alone (aside from Yuuko working on the new returns). It isn't long, however, before I'm startled by the sound of a bang coming from the returns slot, clearly someone bringing books back to the library. I can guess who it is, since not many students tend to come here on a regular basis. Except in exam time, of course. Lilly would be much more gentle, so it has to be Hisao.

We look at each other, our eyes meeting briefly. After a pause, he turns around and heads out. I guess he decided not to disturb me this time. It's nice of him to be so considerate, although truth be told, I'm still not entirely certain I would mind. I still don't know what to make of him, and the more I know about who Hisao is, the more easy it will be for me to trust him. Well, more than I trust most people at Yamaku, or anywhere for that matter. I decide against asking him about his chat with Emi this morning. It's his own business, after all, and I have no right to intrude.

It takes me another half hour before I realise where I'm supposed to be. How could I forget! Lilly and I have the same routine every Monday – we walk into town together and go shopping, food and supplies to last us both the rest of the week. This week, however, we couldn't make it, so we decided to postpone the trip until Friday. And I've left Lilly standing around for all this time alone! Then again, it's not the first time it's happened. Sometimes I get so engrossed in a new book that everything else leaves my mind entirely. Whenever it's happened before, Lilly has been happy to wait for me to remember, but it's still horrible of me to continue here without any consideration for my friend.

I put the books down and leave in a rush, asking Yuuko before I go if she would mind putting them back in the right places. She's used to the routine and agrees readily, though I hate giving her yet another burden on top of her already busy work and studies. I run through the now deserted corridors and out of the main school building, ignoring the 'no-running' rules – there are few people in the school at this time anyway, most students having left to go into town or to their dormitories, or working on festival projects. I reach the meeting place where Lilly always waits, and find...

Nothing. She isn't here. I look around, puzzled, wondering where she could be, when in the corner of my eye I notice a flash of gold in the distance. I look down the main path that leads from Yamaku towards the town, and far ahead I notice a figure with a cane and long blonde hair. Walking alongside the person is a young man with shorter, darker hair, apparently dressed in school uniform. They walk slowly together, the person with the cane tapping every couple of steps. I breathe a sigh of relief, though I still feel guilty – Hisao must have had the same intention of going down the hill, and saw Lilly standing alone outside the school gates. Maybe he offered to walk her down in my place? A kind gesture, but it doesn't make me feel better for forgetting in the first place. Ah well, I can apologise later. I choose to take advantage of the free time for now, and begin the long walk back to the library.

Before Saturday classes begin, I reflect a little on the previous night. Lilly turned up at my door with the shopping I would have usually bought, and I paid her my share of the money for it, as we discussed her journey with Hisao. I apologised profoundly for leaving her yet again, but she was fine with it – as mentioned before, it's not exactly a rare occurrence. Lilly spoke about the walk back with Rin, and her usual eccentricities, something I can relate to, if not understand. Lilly and I are alike in that regard, and we both tend to leave Rin alone in general. Neither of us can understand her, and so we try to keep our distances.

It seems that I was right, too, about Hisao's condition. Arrhythmia, it's called. Lilly told me how shocked she was when she heard it from his own lips, though she was careful to keep her surprise well hidden. Concern, however, still shone through, hardly odd when Lilly is involved. My fears following the incident with Emi a few days ago were confirmed with Lilly's words, and she correctly guessed that I already suspected something.

"You knew from the other day, then?"

"Y... yes. I saw him clutching his chest and I-I figured something was wrong."

"You should have told me!" Lilly's concern tends to be rather stifling at times, but I suppose she had a point this time. From Hisao's point of view, maybe he felt embarrassed, but it doesn't do him any favours keeping something like that from those around him.

Then again, look who's talking.

Returning to the present, I look up to see Mutou-sensei staggering into the classroom, tired. And, I would guess, hungover. He writes some question and page numbers on the blackboard and collapses into his chair, but most of the class are used to it. Mutou has an amazing ability to still be able to teach successfully even when his state is borderline lethargic, at best, and as long as he can keep it up nobody will complain. It tends to just be Saturday mornings anyway, since even teachers deserve to cut loose a little on a Friday night. Since everyone appears just as tired as the teacher, we all

work in silence. Helped in no small part by Misha's absence – presumably working last-minute with Shizune. The festival is only a day away, after all.

The silence is broken only by a quiet comment from Mutou.

"Nakai, can I speak to you for a moment?"

"Sure..." comes the reply from Hisao. "What's this about?"

"It's probably better if we speak outside the classroom..." Mutou-sensei walks out of the room, Hisao following, and I look up as they leave. My mind fills with possibilities for what they could be talking about, but I soon ignore it and get back to focusing on my work.

They're only gone for a couple of minutes, but even so I notice a couple of students who were borderline asleep suddenly jump up and start working again as soon as they hear the door. Mutou walks back inside, followed again by Hisao, and return to their previous tasks. I don't really know why the newly work-engaged students even bother – more are still resting, not even attempting to work on the assigned questions, and to be perfectly honest I can hardly blame them. Me on the other hand... well, I abandon classes enough that when I am actually present it doesn't do me any good to ignore the work set. Even if I feel like sleeping myself sometimes.

It takes a good long time before the bell rings, but we have a final minute of torture before we can finally go.

"Before you all leave," says Mutou, "I expect the answers for those problems by Monday." Typical. Still, I've done most of them already, so my weekend is pretty free to catch up on my never-ending backlog of books. Perhaps spend some time in town with Lilly (provided there aren't too many students with similar ideas of where to go). Judging by the sighs, I can think of more than a few students who will have a lot of work to do before they can enjoy tomorrow's festival, though...

The classroom empties quickly, and after less than a minute Hisao and I are the only ones left. I'm waiting for Lilly, of course, but it's not clear to me

why Hisao is hanging around. I don't ask him either, and a silence descends between the two of us like fog. For the next quarter of an hour, Hisao writes in his notebook and I read my latest borrowed novel. The noises from the seat so close to mine become an annoyance, disturbing the quietness as I wait for Lilly to arrive. Paper rustling and pencil lead scratching. I don't look at Hisao, in fact I keep my eyes fixed firmly on the pages of my book. Soon enough, Lilly comes by.

"Hanako?"

Upon hearing her voice I get up and walk quickly to her. The awkwardness between Hisao and myself was stifling, and it's a relief to have Lilly here now. I guess after everything it still feels difficult for me to be in Hisao's presence. I can hardly even begin a conversation with him, and he seems in constant fear of setting off my anxieties – hardly a great combination.

Lilly and I start to speak quietly to each other. It's not that either of us wants to deliberately keep Hisao out of the loop. In fact, Lilly isn't even aware of his presence. It's simply that there isn't any need for loudness. Our conversation is between us, nobody else.

"Sorry for taking so long, Hanako."

"That... that's okay," I reply. "It's fine."

"I, um, won't be able to stay for very long. Actually, I need to go pretty soon." Lilly seems genuinely sorry, as if she knows what effect this could have on me.

"What? Why?"

"I had a phone call yesterday afternoon. Akira's in town today. I guess I should have told you sooner..." Lilly's sister. Of course, I understand why she has to go. I guess I'm just a little selfish at heart, but given my life so far one can hardly blame me. I look forlorn and make an effort to try and convince her to stay, though I'm fully aware of my actions. I can't stop Lilly from seeing Akira, especially since they don't often get to meet given

Akira's work. And really, my issue is less to do with selfishness and more to do with being alone with only Hisao to keep me company. I like him, I really do, given the effort he's been making to overcome the difficulties inherent in even speaking to me. But it's hard for me to interact with him, and having Lilly around would be a great help.

"Do... do you really have t-to go?" I try to sound as innocent and helpless as I can. It usually works with Lilly, though I very rarely use it on her. I always feel so guilty afterwards, but usually it works when I want ask to do something I want for once. I wish she would treat me as someone stronger. But until then, subtleness is always a useful trait to have. Maybe she'll see that strength in time.

"I haven't seen my sister in weeks. I'm really very sorry, Hanako, but I can't just bail on her at such short notice. Is there anything you can do yourself while I'm in town?"

I already feel bad about my attempts to manipulate Lilly's affections. Plus, I do quite like Akira. She's one of the few people who treats me like a normal person. I decide to tell Lilly about Hisao's presence.

"H-Hisao is... here," I manage.

"There you go then! You can spend some time with him, maybe. Talk a little." She smiles sweetly at me, and although I know Lilly can't see me I try to suppress a grimace. Hisao can still look over, after all. I hate it when she tries to interfere! I know she means well, I know she thinks it's for the best, but pushing me does no good at all. Surely she knew Hisao was here from the start. He's still making sounds with his pencil scratching at paper, trying to work, breathing heavily, though it looks as if he's making a clear effort not to eavesdrop. I doubt he can hear us anyway given the volume Lilly and I are speaking at. She must have heard him from the start. All this was planned from the moment she walked inside. We may be close friends, and she may have my best interests at heart, but Lilly can be just as manipulative as I try to be sometimes. Such a facade to hide behind! It makes me so annoyed at times.

Resigned to Lilly's suggestion, and realising my defeat (even if I wasn't trying too hard anyway), I agree with her. We say our goodbyes, and I give my best wishes to pass on to Akira. As Lilly leaves, I sit down at my desk again, chin in hand, staring down. I think about what to do to pass the time. I have no work to do, having already finished during class. Going to my room is pointless. And I hardly want to stay here, perpetuating the silence between Hisao and myself. Awkwardness may be my calling card, but it's not my desire. I pull out my book again, and start to read, but can feel Hisao's eyes on me. When he next turns away, I get up and leave, heading for my usual spot in the library.

I didn't expect him to follow me. I sit in a beanbag, my regular seat, reading the book I had in the classroom, when I hear footsteps. Quiet ones, not loud and clumsy, so I know it can't be Yuuko. She normally works elsewhere on a Saturday anyway, at the Shanghai tea-house, so the other likely contender would be Hisao. The low sound doesn't startle me, but I look up anyway and see him slowly sink into another beanbag near me. I don't appreciate him coming here, but I do appreciate the care he takes to avoid disturbing me too much. I feel rather conflicted, whether to be pleased or angry. I settle for neutrality.

"Is that the same book as before?" he asks, breaking the silence again.

"Y-yes... I'm almost finished..." I reply.

"Cool." A pause. "Do you mind if I borrow it when you're finished?"

I can't say no, it's not mine. Anyone is free to borrow books from the library. But I feel like he's trying to engage with me through our mutual passion of books, and it's enough to make me answer without much problem.

"S-sure... you m-may not like it, but..."

Hisao interjects before I finish. "I'm sure it can't be that bad. After all, you've stuck with it, haven't you?"

"I-I guess..."

Hisao settles and digs out a book from his own bag, starting to read. I try to do the same and focus on my own book, but it's hard to get back into it. The brief discussion has made me actually want to talk, just a little. If I want people to take me seriously, I can't just retreat into a shell whenever someone tries to interact. But even then, I can't bring myself to start the conversation. Hisao ends up doing so himself. Perhaps he came to the same conclusions regarding his book.

"So, I see Lilly left without you?"

I nod briefly, then look up. My attempt to read has been foiled, and I'm not too bothered. Doesn't mean I'll take the lead as we talk, but at least I can answer okay.

"Lilly said she had to go and... meet someone..."

"Oh?"

"A-Akira," I tell him. "Her sister..."

"Sister?" says Hisao. "I haven't heard her talk about her family..."

"She... she and Akira used to live together."

Apparently this is news to Hisao. Then again, Lilly told him before, right? How she didn't always live in the dorms here, but only for a short while until now.

"I thought all the students lived in the dorms?" he asks.

"T-they... I mean we... don't have to." I wonder if he picked up on the accidental 'they' comment? I didn't mean it, but I guess it's another reminder of how I tend to keep myself away from everyone else. I can't even consider us as part of the same group, between me and the other students here. A

self-imposed segregation, born out of fear. And the worst part is, I'm fully aware of it all.

Hisao brings me back to the topic at hand. "But it's easier, right? I mean, there's food here, and you're close to school... I don't think I've been to class on time so often in my life."

That makes me smile a little, though I try unsuccessfully to hide it. Hisao makes a good point.

"Hey, Hanako..." he begins. "What are you doing for the festival?"

This is a sudden change in mood. Surely he doesn't seriously expect me to go tomorrow! Or is it something else he means? The shock renders me almost speechless, though I manage to let out a brief "S-sorry?" while staring at him.

"I was just asking what you're doing for the festival tomorrow. Anything planned?"

So he is serious, then. "I... I don't know."

I hope he gets the hint. I try to be evasive, deliberately, and make it as obvious as I can that we're both better off abandoning this line of conversation. Hisao seems to understand, because his next words sound rather defeated, but willing to forget the topic.

"Oh, okay," he says. "So, what's Lilly's sister like?"

The change in topic is a good one. This is something I can actually talk about. "She... she's nice. She's pretty, like Lilly, but she dresses... business-like..."

"Business-like?" Hisao sounds curious.

"She... she's always wearing a suit..."

"Ah, I see," Hisao says. "And that makes her less pretty somehow?"

It's kind of embarrassing to be heading down this path. Not to mention, after the effort Hisao has made simply to make friends with me, I almost feel a pang of jealousy at his apparent interest in Akira. Nothing so strong, but just a slight feeling. It confuses me a little, but I let it pass. I shake my head briefly and answer Hisao's question.

"N-no... just... different." Something I can relate to again. But it's clear from my tone of voice how much I do like her, how friendly Akira is to me without even making the kind of effort Hisao is making now. Perhaps it's the Western influence in their family that gives both Akira and Lilly the tolerance so few people in Japan have for... people like me. Especially ones who see their condition the way I do.

"Well," Hisao starts, "one day you'll have to introduce me to her."

That, I can do. "O-okay." I smile at Hisao, before the silence returns, the conversation over. We return to our respective books, and I think about the talk we have just had. It was nice to finally talk to Hisao properly, without my nerves getting in the way. Regardless of my feelings at the start, we had a good time, without it dragging on, and without Hisao intruding on me too much. He knew to back off when necessary, something not many people would do. Misha certainly wouldn't. As we read, the sun begins to slowly fade away in the summer afternoon and the light through the window takes on a more serene crimson colour.

A while later, we both notice the time has passed so quickly. We've clearly been in the library for a good few hours, not talking, but reading and just enjoying the calmness of each other's company. Hisao, as always, is the first to speak.

"Do you think Lilly would be back by now? I think I might head back to my dorm. I'm pretty tired from this week." I look over at Hisao as he speaks, and can see his eyes starting to droop. It looks like he's struggling to keep them open. I, on the other hand, feel fine.

"O-okay. I... I might stay here a little longer." I'm literally at the end of my book, and would feel bad if I had to walk to my room to finish, only to walk

all the way back here to swap for something else. Hisao asked to borrow it next, anyway.

"Sure thing," he says. "Well, I'm going to head off before it gets dark. I'll see you around, okay?"

"O-okay. See you, Hisao."

"Later," he replies. Before he leaves, though, I think of something else.

"H-Hisao?"

"Hmm?"

"T-thank you. F-for hanging out with me." I can't hide the smile on my face, so I don't even bother to try. I can only begin to guess what Hisao's thoughts are regarding it, but I don't care. Either way, I feel happier today than I have done for quite a while, and certainly happier in Hisao's company than I was nearer the start of the week. I hope he realises that.

"You're welcome." Hisao smiles back at me, though it looks a little forced. I guess with all the previous awkwardness between us, that's only to be expected, and the genuine sentiment is still clear for all to see. It makes my own joy that bit more profound. "Goodnight, Hanako."

"N-night."

Hisao leaves the library as I watch, before I turn back to my book. I read the top of the penultimate page and drift back into the story...

6. Act 1, Chapter 6: En Passant

Act 1 – Chapter Six: En Passant

Sometimes, I wonder whether or not I should try staying in the library overnight. I spend enough time there, and it seems a waste of effort to leave in the evening only to be straight back there the following morning. I'm certain Yuuko wouldn't mind. Then again, although the teachers are lenient about my skipping classes, I think they would take a much dimmer view of me actually moving into the library. I bring it up because yet again, the library is where I find myself during the festival, away from all the stalls and crowds outside.

I used to go somewhere else during this time. A quiet clearing in the woods, just off campus. Nobody else seemed to know about it, and I used it as another place of refuge when Yamaku became too busy for me to stay. Then someone thought it would be a good idea to go there with their family for a picnic, and my safe haven was no longer so much of a haven. Last year I chose to stay in the dormitory, figuring that everyone would be at the festival instead of staying in their rooms. Then I realised it would mean barricading myself in my own bedroom – too late for me to escape without running into the crowds again. I didn't think how people would be showing their families their rooms and spending time there during the day. I ended up staying in my own room for the entire festival period, not even leaving for the bathroom, nor to eat. Not so great a time for me.

So this year, I decided to leave as early as I could, before people started arriving for the festival. And now I find myself sitting in my beanbag reading through another new novel, listening to the faint sounds of the revelries outside. I have no desire to go out there and join everyone. I'm more than happy to sit here on my own, curled up with a good book.

It's something of a surprise to hear Hisao's voice, when I assumed he would be with Lilly enjoying the festivities.

"Hey, Hanako. I had a feeling I'd find you here..." Hisao's intuition serves him well, it seems.

I jump a little, before slowly poking my head above the low block of shelves separating the two of us. "H-Hisao?" I wonder why he isn't outside, actually.

"Hey. Lilly's pretty busy, so she sent me to find you." The answer to my unspoken question is brief, but it makes sense. Lilly would be concerned, after all. It's just how she is. Neither she nor Hisao would have really expected me to be with the masses of people, so coming here was the obvious step.

"O-oh," I reply. "Do you want to sit down?"

"Actually, I'm feeling a little hungry," says Hisao. "Would you like to get something to eat from one of the stands?"

I guessed he would try this. Sometimes, it looks like Hisao can be as bad as Lilly, trying to get me to act a little more 'normal', or at least be more social. Fortunately, I came prepared. I knew I wouldn't get a chance to go and eat elsewhere during the day anyway.

"Um... I... I brought some food, so..."

Hisao frowns a little as I foil his plans, but he doesn't give up. The compromise he offers is much easier for me to bear, though. "How about we eat in the tea room? I passed by it on the way here, and no-one was around. We can make some food there, and it'll be a little more comfortable. What do you say?"

I think it over, and realise he definitely does have a point. It's not like there's anywhere to prepare anything edible here in the library, whereas the tea room has facilities long ago installed for students before Lilly and I started attending Yamaku. Nobody else tends to go there, so it'll certainly be private. If I'm with Hisao, it won't be so bad.

"S-sure. Let's go." I close my current book and place it delicately into my bag.

"Good to go?" I notice Hisao watching my movements with a curious look on his face. What could he be thinking, I wonder.?

"Y... yeah." We leave together, and walk slowly along the deserted corridors to the tea room. Without any windows to let the sound in, the festival is barely audible. I focus on the floor ahead of me and start to forget that Hisao is even here. My steps start to fall into an old routine, a game of sorts from when I was younger. I remember the times not long after my accident, when the other children would tease me and abuse me for my scars. In my loneliness, I made up all sorts of games purely to distract myself. The games worked, to a point, and eventually I was able to bury my thoughts and emotions behind deep walls, walls that very few people have ever breached. Even Lilly hasn't managed to break the toughest ones down. The therapists try hard, but they too have always met with failure.

As we walk, I manage to completely forget Hisao, which makes it all the more startling when he speaks up.

"Are you alright?"

I stop, completely still. My eyes turn to meet Hisao's. "W-what?"

"I dunno... it looked like you were tripping or something."

So he noticed my footsteps. I feel my cheeks redden slightly and my gaze drops to the floor again. "It... it's nothing."

"You know," replies Hisao, "when you say 'nothing' like that, people are inspired to ask further questions."

I pause for a moment. He's absolutely right, and I should know that better than anyone. I've had the same situation several times before, when people have asked me questions that I don't want to answer. Mainly about myself, and my scars. Avoiding the issue only makes them more curious, until I

have to flee the situation entirely. I realise that answering honestly is the best course of action, though I won't give away any information I don't have to. There's no real need for Hisao to know the whys and the hows of my little quirks.

He's almost started to continue walking when I smile a little, kind of embarrassed, and answer him.

"It's a... a game."

"Game?"

"Do you... see the floor here?" I point down at the linoleum tiles at our feet.

"Well, yes. What about it?"

"Sometimes... when there's no-one around... I only step on the darker ones..." My embarrassment at playing such a childish game grows as I finish speaking, but it hardly matters anyway. Truth be told, I do play it sometimes when walking with Lilly. She can't see me, of course, so it doesn't bother me with her being present. Occasionally though, I suspect she might be able to hear my erratic footsteps, but she's never commented on it. Not to me at least.

"Darker ones?" asks Hisao.

I shuffle my feet a little and point a toe to the kind of tile I mean. "L-like, these ones." Some are a shade darker than others, not usually noticeable except in strong light. But I seem to have a knack for picking the right kind. I've been playing this game since I was a little kid.

"Oh, right, so these ones are no good?" Hisao nudges his own feet towards another, very slightly lighter, tile.

"Y-yeah. Something... something like that."

"Oh, I see. Do you play this game a lot?"

I shake my head. It's kind of rare that I get the chance and actually decide to play. Which makes it all the more embarrassing when I do play it.

"Just when the halls are empty?" Now he gets it! I nod my head in confirmation.

"Well then," says Hisao, "no point in stopping. I'm beginning to get really hungry."

He says this as I can see the tiny miso soup stains on the bottom of his sleeve, and smell the strong flavours on his breath. Still, I agree with him. I'm getting pretty hungry too, so I nod my head again, but with a clear enthusiasm this time.

"Well then, let's go."

As we continue to walk, I make a conscious effort to get out of my old routines from childhood, stepping wherever I please without caring what colour each tile is. I can see something rather different in the corner of my eye, though. Looks like Hisao's caught the game bug as well. I try to suppress a small giggle, unsuccessfully, but I don't think Hisao heard it...

We soon reach the door to the tea room. We enter, and I move across to my regular seat, as Hisao walks to the window. He opens it and breathes deeply. I guess the air here is somewhat different to city air. Looking at Hisao, he strikes me as a city person, someone who's never really spent much time in a rural area like this. I learned how to judge people long ago, though my intuition isn't always spot on.

"Do... would you like some tea?" I ask, playing mother in Lilly's absence.

"That would be great, thanks."

I fill the pot and set it to boil, following the same traditional ritual Lilly always uses. Although I can see exactly what I'm doing, unlike her, I still take the same amount of care and consideration, both in the brewing and in making a set of sandwiches from my meagre packed lunch. It's not the first

time Hisao's seen me do this, but I can feel his eyes on me, watching intently. For once, though, it doesn't bother me. I feel much happier to be alone with him after the effort he's shown this week. And it's nice to have someone here with me today, of all days, when I don't feel up to going outside with everyone else. Everyone deserves to be with someone on a day like this.

When the tea is ready, I place the tray with the pot and sandwiches on the table and pour two cups for us. Hisao's voice cuts through the silence, but the room remains calm.

"I think I know why you like this room now."

"Um... I don't know what you mean." I think I do, really, but I'd like to hear him say it.

"Well, there are quite a few people out there, but in here it's like another world. You can pretend that there's no-one around for miles."

"Y-you're right." And he is. Even with the windows open, a gentle breeze flowing in through the warm summer sun, the noise of the festival is almost unnoticeable. Looking out, I can't see anyone. This room is like a tiny little bubble inside Yamaku, one that's not quite ready to pop. "It's like the world has forgotten this room. And b-because of that, you can forget about the outside."

I smile at Hisao. I could do with forgetting so much. Even in Yamaku, I feel like an outsider. I stay away from people because I don't trust them enough, but it would be good for someone to make an effort, and at least try to be friendly. It never happens. Nobody bullies anyone here, because we're all in the same boat, but you can't throw a couple of hundred teenagers together and expect them to all get on alright, even when they're all united by something like our disabilities. We're still regular people, with everything that entails.

"That's a good point. It's like this room gives you some kind of complete freedom."

"Y-yeah." That's exactly it. Here, I feel like I can be myself. On that note...
"Say... do you play chess?" I ask Hisao.

"Chess? I've played it a bit, I guess...I take it you've played before?"

"A little..." Or perhaps I'm something of a chess shark... then again, perhaps not. I walk over to a cupboard and pull out an old set. I usually play with Lilly, so the pieces are well worn, though they weren't exactly new when we first began to play the game together. It's Western chess, rather than Shogi, so I can't be sure how familiar Hisao is with it. Lilly often proves a challenging opponent, but her familiarity with Western culture would be a great help. I wonder if the specific cultural version of the game will be an advantage to me, or not so much?

"Do... do you want..." My query is lost in my nervous stammer, but Hisao realises what I was trying to say. Asking if he wants to be the White player, and start the game.

"Sure, why not?" We set the board up and take our positions, Hisao opening with his queen-side centre pawn moving two squares ahead. I respond with my opposite corner knight, and soon I find myself lost in the game, enjoying the moment of tranquillity. I used to play chess as yet another distraction, anything to keep my mind off the torment I suffered as a child. At least life got a bit better at the orphanage as I grew older. I suppose chess is also a reminder of happier times for me...

Hisao starts to build up a smart defence with his knights and pawns. I can see his plan, to free his king ready for castling. I try to counter with one of my bishops, but am soon driven back by his own, and lose control of the centre of the board. It looks like this game may be more of a challenge than I thought. I retaliate with my pawns, only for Hisao to engage in a risky sacrifice, losing a bishop to take one of my knights. Perhaps he thinks one is more valuable than the other? I wonder if I can use that to my advantage...

Another sacrifice, but a stupid one this time. Hisao sends his knight to attack one of my pawns, only to lose it to my remaining bishop. It's only

afterwards that I realise how painfully obvious his plan was, and how I was a fool to miss it. His queen is already in place, and puts me immediately into check. With very few options open to me I choose to defend using my own queen. I realise it will lead to a mutual sacrifice, but I'd rather there be no queen on the board than have Hisao's queen ravaging my defence.

He takes the bait, and I take his queen with my king. I guess I can't castle now, which may have been his plan in the first place, removing another aspect of my defence. We continue on, and Hisao proceeds to wipe out my remaining central pieces, despite a suicidal yet brave attempt by myself to attack using my first bishop. A concentrated pawn attack is defended by one of Hisao's rooks, while his second remains unmoved in the corner. We exchange our remaining bishops, saving me from yet another check. Hisao's strategy has been very aggressive, forcing me to constantly react and giving no quarter for me to attack. What started as an equal match, a war of attrition, has quickly developed into an onslaught with a clear victor.

I take the chance to move my pawns on the unguarded left flank. My right, Hisao's left. He spots this quickly, however, and moves his knight into the empty space, driving my king back further. He reacts with his own flanked pawns and quickly takes advantage of my scattered positioning, before cornering my king with his knight, a solitary pawn, and a rook.

"Checkmate." The game is over. I'm quite surprised at how well Hisao played. I'm normally a pretty good chess player, but today was something of an off day. I guess I just wasn't as into it as usual, but it was nice to play against Hisao. I enjoyed it. I didn't feel quite as competitive as I tend to be. I can't even remember the last time Lilly managed to beat me. When I play chess, I like to win, though I'm nowhere near the insane levels of competitiveness as, say, Shizune. I wonder what it would be like, playing chess against her...

"You're not bad at this, are you?" I feel something new at Hisao's words, something I've not felt in a very long time. I'm actually flattered. I smile at Hisao, just slightly, but the happy sentiment I feel is much greater than that.

"I... I guess not," I reply.

"Does Lilly play?" He picks up a piece and studies it. Maybe he's wondering how a blind person could possibly play chess, at least with any amount of skill?

I pause at this. "A... a bit. T-this is the first time I've played against someone... other than her, or..." I stop suddenly. This is bringing up bad memories, reminding me of the exact reason why I'm at Yamaku in the first place. Why the people I played chess with are no longer around. I can't bring myself to tell Hisao why, so soon after we've met. Maybe one day, but I'm not yet ready.

Fortunately, Hisao knows when to leave well enough alone. "Well then, I'm honoured to have played against you."

I smile again, a more sheepish grin this time, glad that Hisao has the foresight and intuition to avoid pushing things too far. I feel bold enough to make a small request. "Um... can we play again?" I think this time, I'll be sure to win. I'm all fired up inside from the last game, even if I don't show it outwardly.

"Sure," Hisao replies. "Though don't expect me to go easy on you this time."

I can hear the competitiveness in his voice. My eyes narrow and I continue to smile, but with a far more mischievous look. I briefly consider what Hisao might think of my expression as I reply to his challenge. "S... same here..."

We begin setting the board up for our rematch, when I hear the door open. We both turn at the noise to see Lilly gently walking in. "Good afternoon."

"Lilly..." I start to speak at the same time as Hisao.

"Oh, hey there Lilly. Are you finished?" I guess he's referring to Lilly's class stall at the festival. I'd almost forgotten about it in the peace and calm

of this room.

"You both are here? Wonderful. At any rate, our teacher was able to round up some extra help, so I was able to leave. Have you been here since you left?"

"Pretty much, we've just been playing a bit of chess."

I take the opportunity to interject. "W-would you like a cup of tea?"

"Actually," replies Lilly, "I think it may be a good idea to go outside for a little while."

Does she really expect me to agree to that? It's hard enough when I'm with a few classmates, how does she think I'll be able to cope with being in the crowds at the festival? There's a damn good reason why I chose to spend my day in the library and in here. Talk about trying to throw me in at the deep end! Still, I'm not in the mood for a confrontation with Lilly, so I say nothing. She can't see the change on my face, but Hisao can.

"I... I kinda think that we should just stay here..." Hisao comes to my rescue. I'm relieved when Lilly's next words reveal both mine and Hisao's error in judgement.

"Really? It's so crowded here that I was thinking we should leave the school and head for the local tea house."

"You mean the S-Shanghai?" That sounds like a much better plan. I quite enjoy going to the Shanghai, and Yuuko is likely to be working there today. I didn't see her in the library, after all.

"Of course. With everyone at the festival it should be practically empty." Just the way I like it.

"Tea house?" Of course, Hisao doesn't know about the Shanghai. He's not been there so far this week, I suppose. Well, it looks like Lilly and I will have to educate him.

"Oh, that's right," says Lilly. "You probably haven't heard of it. There is a tea house not far from here, which we go to every so often."

"Sounds like a plan." Hisao seems reasonably happy to visit there. "Hanako, what do you think?"

I jump slightly at being directly addressed, and have to fight the temptation to retreat into myself as I so often do. I'm glad that Hisao chose to seek my opinion though, rather than assuming I would be happy to go. As it turns out, I'm more than happy to visit the Shanghai, even if I feel a slight disappointment in abandoning our rematch. "If... if it's the Shanghai, I think it'll be nice." I don't just think it. I'm certain of it.

"Well then, it's settled. Let's be on our way." I notice smiles on everyone's faces to some extent. My own included. With a practised movement I quickly return the chess board and pieces to their proper place in the cupboard.

"Looks like we're ready now," says Hisao. "Please, lead on."

I walk close to Lilly, helping to guide her through the corridors, keeping clear wherever I hear too much sound. We make our way to the front gates, with Hisao following, and begin the descent down the hill. The noise from the festival is faint and the sun is starting to set, the sky a dark red.

"Strange," Hisao comments. "I thought that most people would be beginning to leave by now..."

"They're probably here to view the fireworks." I can hear just a hint of bitterness in Lilly's voice as she mentions the firework display that traditionally closes the school festival, but I'm not so sure Hisao notices.

"Fireworks?"

"Yes, apparently the school puts on quite a show. A lot of people come from town just to watch them."

I can't really blame them. The fireworks are visible from the town, so I won't be missing them, and for that I'm glad. They're the one part of the festival I can actually enjoy, and every year's display seems to be better than the last. It's good that we're headed out of the school, though. With so many people coming up, I'm better off downhill, though we see very few people walking the path. Most have already arrived, or plan to drive here. Still, I focus on the route ahead. Even the stares of the small number of fellow pedestrians is too much for me.

Soon enough, we've reached the Shanghai. From the outside it looks quite ordinary, but inside it's something else. I've rarely seen anywhere quite as traditional and rustic as the Shanghai, a quaint feel giving rise to a peaceful atmosphere that goes right through me. It's also quiet, since most of the town are now at Yamaku. Not that it tends to get too busy here anyway, though when it does I can easily hide in one of the high-backed booths. Yuuko always makes sure to reserve one if there's a chance Lilly and I will be stopping by. Speaking of Yuuko, she doesn't seem to be around right now...

"Er, is this place closed or something?" I find myself agreeing with Hisao's sentiment. Until a red-haired bespectacled figure suddenly jumps up from behind a booth.

"I wasn't asleep and welcome to the Shanghai!" Wasn't asleep. Right.

Yuuko rushes over from her resting place clutching a menu. Before she can say another word, however, Hisao asks the obvious question.

"You work here now? What happened to the library?"

"What? Lilly? Hisao?" I don't feel left out, like most people would at being ignored. Sometimes I suppose I can blend into the background a little too well, and Yuuko does look rather puzzled anyway. Best not to confuse her even more. "Welcome to the Shanghai!"

She bows low, much lower than one would expect a server to bow even in a place as old-fashioned as this. Her glasses, already askew from her 'not

sleeping', slip even further down her face and fall to the floor. "Uweh? My glasses..." Hisao picks them up for her, while Lilly starts to explain to him why Yuuko is present.

"Yuuko works here part-time as well as at the library. It's one of the reasons we like to come here."

Yuuko takes her glasses back and responds, "Yes... that's right... thanks... Shall I show you to your table?" I look around and see nothing but empty tables. The place is completely deserted – as if Yuuko's snooze wasn't evidence enough of that. "There's no-one else here so you can choose your table and order whatever you like, but there may be a delay as I will have to make it myself..."

Lilly clearly agrees with me that there's no need to make a fuss. "It's all right, Yuuko. Just a pot of black tea and a plate of sandwiches will be fine."

"Right! I'll get right onto that!" Yuuko runs off towards the kitchens, only to return almost instantly. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Please, sit wherever you like! I'll be right back!" Yuuko has pretty much been like this for as long as I've known her. Slightly neurotic, eager to please everyone yet always nervous that she isn't doing a good job of it. Still, she's a genuinely good person. I just think she could be a bit more relaxed sometimes.

Hisao takes the lead, guiding Lilly and myself to a booth near the entrance, and sits down. Lilly and I also sit, the booth effectively cutting us off from the rest of the tea house. If anyone else walks in they wouldn't even know we were here.

"So, Hisao," says Lilly. "I didn't know you played chess..."

"Well, not very well, but I do know how to play." I assume they're both talking about Western chess as opposed to Shogi. I've never actually played Shogi against Lilly, though it would be interesting to try. I find the tactical aspect so much more complex, and much more fascinating, but I don't know if Lilly has any idea of the different rules.

"I suppose the obvious question would now be... who won?"

Lilly has such an innocent smile on her face, but her real thoughts are locked to me. Such an enigma, I have no idea what she hopes to find out here. Hisao's pause gives me a clue, though. I see a frown on his face, while I look rather sheepish, but there's no way for Lilly to pick up on that. I guess she wants to test Hisao rather than me for once – maybe to see how he reacts to the question. Whether he's a gracious victor or a sore loser. Either way, I decide to put them both out of their misery.

"H-Hisao did."

"Yes... but, uh, not by much..." Hisao's voice is full of guilt for beating me. He appears to be downplaying the result purely so it doesn't seem like he hurt my feelings. I wish he wasn't treating me like a fragile doll, but I appreciate the sentiment. It's rather amusing to see him so flat footed.

"Well done, Hisao. You've accomplished something I've only ever failed at." To be fair, it is more difficult for Lilly to play chess. She has to remember the locations of all the pieces, keeping a detailed play-by-play run-through of the game in her head. Or feel every piece and remember which are black and which are white. Then again, blindfold chess is a good way to improve the strength of most regular players. Strictly speaking she should be getting much better with every game...

"Er, thanks," replies Hisao. "I haven't played in ages, so it felt good to play again."

"Y... yes... It did." My nerves show as I start to play with my hair a little, but I can't avoid a little smile.

As we discuss the chess game, Yuuko makes her return, carrying a tray with a large pot of tea, cups and saucers, and a plate of sandwiches. "Are you alright there, Yuuko?" asks Hisao. "Do you need a hand?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine. I have to do this properly, it's my job."

So obsessive about her work. She looks down at the tray, staring as if she's willing it to stay steady. It doesn't work. Everything is rattling hard as she gently lowers the tray, placing it on the table with a gentle crash. "There, see!"

"Err, well done?" says Hisao, looking rather baffled.

"Thank you, Yuuko," Lilly says. Yuuko bows once more, head low again.

"You're very welcome."

"Would you like to join us? There's something else I'd like to discuss about that recent order, if I may..." Lilly was telling me the other evening that she'd ordered a lot of books in Braille, as part of her duties as class rep. There was only a limited selection until a few weeks ago, and she told me the blind students were getting somewhat annoyed at what they felt was ignorance regarding their own requirements. Now they need sorting, and Lilly had agreed to help Yuuko organise them.

"Ah, yes," comes the response from Yuuko. "We didn't get the chance to go through them, did we?" She sits down quickly. "I'll be in the library tomorrow afternoon if you'd like to try again..."

"That sounds perfect. I'll meet you there after classes."

I interject here. Lilly's actually forgotten something rather important...

"Um... L-Lilly..."

"Oh dear, that's right. Tomorrow is Monday, how could I have forgotten?" I can't really comment here, given what I did on Friday... "Well, perhaps we could come to some other arrangement..." Lilly says. "Yuuko, will you be in the library later this week?"

"Hmm, maybe, but this is already overdue..." Yuuko is pulling Lilly one way...

"A-and there are some... things I n-need..." And I'm pulling her the other. I feel bad, but I need to stand up for what I want for once.

"This might be a problem..." Lilly sounds defeated, but she has to make a choice. Of course, Lilly being Lilly, she decides to take a third option. "I wonder, might we be able to enlist the help of another, if need be...?"

Hisao picks up on who she's referring to, but he doesn't seem to understand what she means. "Um, to do what? You lost me quite some time ago..."

"Oh, of course. The other day I was helping Yuuko sort the new Braille books in the library. But Hanako and I usually go shopping on Monday afternoons; it's much quieter on that day than on weekends." Fridays are a rare occurrence, for essentials, but Mondays are the main shop for the two of us. And truth be told, I really do need to go tomorrow. For reasons that Hisao, as a man, would probably not understand... Lilly continues. "Last week we couldn't go because I was busy with the festival. I managed to slip away later in the week, but Hanako couldn't make it."

She's being quite diplomatic, telling a half-truth while sparing my embarrassment at forgetting to meet Lilly when I did. I'm grateful to her for that. I don't think I could easily face Hisao if he knew about my lapse of memory, although I wouldn't be surprised if he suspected something anyway.

"Well, since I can't read Braille, I'm assuming you'd like me to go shopping with Hanako?"

I look at Hisao with a face like a rabbit in headlights, as I'm certain I've looked before at him. I can't blame Lilly, though. It's a sensible request and solves the problem for her, if Hisao agrees to it. It might be nice to spend more time with him, but then again it might be pretty damn awkward. As usual. And I'd rather be with Lilly than Hisao when buying my... feminine essentials, but they can always wait a few more days.

"Correct," replies Lilly. "You were a great help to me the other day."

"I think I can handle that. Hanako, what do you think?"

It's hard for me to say anything, but I manage it anyway. I guess it won't be so bad, given the extent to which Hisao and I seem to be getting on now. At least, as much as I can get on with anyone. "I-if you wouldn't mind..."

"Of course not. I'm still not familiar with all the stores in the area, so it sounds like a good idea."

"O-okay." I can help him in learning more about the layout of the town, too, and maybe I'll get a chance to show how useful and how strong I can be. Maybe I'll have the courage to take the lead on tomorrow's little journey.

"Now that we have that arranged, shall we have some tea?" The pot is still sitting in the middle of the table, probably cold by this point. It doesn't matter much to me, I don't mind cold tea, but Yuuko still has her nerves shattered trying to make up for her apparent lack of duty.

"It's my fault! Let me pour that for you..." Hisao reaches the pot before she does, however, and starts to pour instead.

"It's alright, I've got it. Since you've already made the tea and sandwiches, you've fulfilled your waitress duties, right?"

"I... I guess..." She doesn't sound so sure.

Before we can begin eating and drinking, a loud bang is heard from outside, and a bright flash. I jump a little at the sound but soon realise what's going on.

"Ah, I take it the show has started." She may not be able to see the fireworks, but Lilly's hearing is as good as most people's. Possibly a bit better, to compensate for her lack of sight. Not that anyone but Shizune could fail to hear the explosions coming from the sky. Really though, I hadn't even realised how much time had passed since we left the school grounds.

"Let's go watch!" Yuuko's waitress duties are all but forgotten as she rushes across to the window, Hisao and I following close behind. "Oh... sorry, Lilly..." Maybe she heard the faint bitter tone in Lilly's voice too?

Lilly takes it in stride, though, and in her usual fashion is as charming and understanding as ever. "Please, don't miss the show on my account. From what I've heard, this isn't a bad location to watch them from."

I love the fireworks. It may seem odd, given the reasons for my condition, but there's always been something about the beauty of the lights in the sky that appealed to me. I know I'm not pretty, but I appreciate beauty elsewhere, regardless of its form. Bright lights shining against such a dark background. It's wonderful to see them before they burn themselves out and fade away...

Fade away they do. Soon enough the show is over, too quickly for my liking, but fireworks cost a lot of money, and even though Yamaku puts a massive amount of effort into the festival compared to other schools, it still has a limited budget to use. We turn to go back to the table with our tea and sandwiches. Before Hisao leaves the window, though, I turn to face him. I want him to know how grateful I am to him for making me feel less lonely. It's hard for me to say anything, especially considering how quiet I usually am, but the words come readily.

"Um, t-thanks for today... and tomorrow."

I smile at him as he replies. "That's okay. I don't think that I could have faced those crowds either. On days like this, it's more relaxing to spend some time away from everyone, don't you think?"

My sentiments exactly. "Y-yeah."

"Anyway, we've been delaying this tea for far too long now, let's get back."

"S-sure." He's right, but it's only as I sit down that I think about how cold the tea will be by this point. I lightly touch the side of my cup as Lilly begins to speak – sure enough, the cup is like ice.

"That sounded impressive," says Lilly, no trace of her earlier disappointment. "Bigger than last year's, at least."

Yuuko is full of excitement, her enthusiasm shining like the fireworks themselves. "Yeah, it was great! I've never seen them put on such a show. It gets better every year!"

"I'm afraid, however, that during that time the tea has gone cold." The frown on Lilly's face isn't one of annoyance, but rather a look of resignation, as if she's simply informing us of the state of our tea before we begin to drink. Yuuko doesn't take it that way, however. Not that she sees Lilly's comment as a criticism, but Yuuko is more prone to criticising herself. Maybe something we have in common? Except I have good reason to do so to myself, whereas she doesn't...

"Oh no! Let me make some more! This is my fault..."

"Calm down, Yuuko, it's nobody's fault." Again, Hisao is the voice of reason. Whenever he takes the chance to defend someone or help someone I feel conflicted. I dislike his tendency to be a white knight for everyone, and I hate it when Lilly does the same for me. I want to stand on my own two feet. But at the same time, seeing Hisao act in such a way for others is rather sweet. It makes me admire him even more. I'm really not sure what I should be feeling, as a matter of fact.

Hisao takes a sip from his cup of tea, licking his lips with clear enjoyment. "This tea isn't too bad cool, anyway. It's like an iced tea."

"Really?" asks Yuuko. I can agree with him actually. After tasting my own cup, I can see Hisao's point.

"Yes, really. If you add a bit of sugar it's kind of nice."

"Are you sure?" Yuuko the skeptic.

"I'm positive. Now, why don't you sit down, and we'll finish this together?"

"O-okay." She sits down in the only free space, next to Hisao. No sooner has she done so than she measures out five spoons of sugar and tips them into her teacup. I've often thought, seeing her drinking tea in her office in the library, that if she isn't careful she'll end up at Yamaku as a student herself. Diabetes, more than likely.

"Er, I said a bit of sugar..." Hisao is alarmed, while Lilly can't see the sheer amount of sugar Yuuko has taken.

"I know, but I like my tea sweet anyway." I'll say. Hisao looks across, into her cup, and I too steal a glance. The sugar is just a lump sitting at the bottom of the cup, even after stirring. Until Yuuko takes a large gulp, of course, and soon there's nothing left in her cup at all. "You're right! That's not bad at all!" she cries out.

"Er, good..." Hisao does the same, while Lilly and I are both already done. "Well then, it seems we're all finished."

"Should we head back now, or do we want seconds?" Lilly's query is reasonable, but I'm not exactly hungry any more, and I can see the look on Yuuko's face. She may take her work very seriously, perhaps a little too seriously, but even she has her limits. Hisao has also seen it, and heads off any further discussion on the matter early.

"I think that it would be best if we got back soon. We do have to get back before curfew, after all."

"Oh," replies Lilly. "That is a good point." Yuuko looks relieved, massively so, and I can hardly blame her. "I'll meet you tomorrow, Yuuko." Lilly is clearly referring to their arrangements regarding the Braille books.

"I'll be looking forward to it, Lilly. Goodnight, everyone."

We make our goodbyes and begin the long walk uphill, back to Yamaku. Because of the festival, curfew has been extended tonight, so we have more time to return than we would normally have, but we hurry anyway. I feel much less self-conscious walking in the dark, where fewer people can

notice my scars, but I still lead us along a few more minor streets to avoid the bulk of the returning crowd. When we arrive at Yamaku, standing outside the dormitories, Hisao bids Lilly and I farewell.

"Well then, thank you both for today. I think I learned a lot."

"You're most welcome," says Lilly, "but I'm afraid that I really must be going. Today's been a long day." She has spent half of it on her class stall, after all, and the walk uphill can be very draining even when not carrying bags of shopping, as we usually do.

"Sure thing. Well then, I'll see you both tomorrow. Good night."

"Good night, Hisao," comes Lilly's response.

"N-night," I stammer. Lilly and I leave Hisao to his own journey back, as we walk across to the girl's dorm.

"So, how was it all for you?" Lilly asks. We're both aware the conversation won't be very long, as we are both somewhat exhausted after today, but I answer anyway.

"It was... fun. I-I enjoyed spending time with H-Hisao." I'm stuttering, as usual, but I'm smiling too. Lilly won't be able to see that, but she can surely hear the happiness in my tone of voice. She smiles too, in my general direction, as we enter the girls' dormitory building.

"I'm glad to hear it. You two get along so well..." With that, Lilly heads up the stairs alone, leaving me to wonder what she means. I get the feeling she senses something that I don't. Wondering at what that might be, I follow her upstairs and retreat to my own room for a well earned rest.

7. Act 2, Chapter 1: Rosemary and Thyme

Act 2 – Chapter One: Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme...

I awaken slightly later than usual, but today I have every intention of going to class. If only because I want to see Hisao again. It's a very new feeling, a very strange one, but I don't feel like avoiding him today. I'm a little embarrassed, yes, but I feel like I can stand up to whatever glances come my way, whatever judgemental looks I get, if I'm there with him.

I can't avoid being a little late, though. Fortunately, Mutou-sensei hasn't arrived yet. Misha and Shizune, on the other hand...

"G... good morning, Hisao." I enter the classroom and gently close the door behind me, ignoring the pointed look from Shizune and the naturally confused expression on Misha's face.

"Morning, Hanako. You're a little late, aren't you?"

"I... was talking to Lilly. A... about today." Turns out we were both more tired last night than we'd realised, and we both overslept. We walked together to class, chatting about the night before. As well as the potential aftermath. I was curious to figure out what she meant with her comment last night, about how well Hisao and I get on, but she wouldn't give me any more details. I wonder... never mind. She gave me her shopping list anyway, so I know what she needs later.

"Ah, so you've got her list then? We can leave straight after classes in that case."

"S-sure."

"I'm looking forward to it." At this I smile briefly, while noticing a glare coming my way. I guess Shizune had other plans for Hisao today. Not that she'd get very far with them anyway. Today, Hisao is mine! Time Shizune learned that not everything she wants is going to happen, and Hisao's

attention can be directed elsewhere. I head to my seat as Mutou-sensei arrives, and classes begin.

It's actually rather boring. We get exercises set from the textbook and very little else to do. Everyone, Mutou included, is feeling the effect of yesterday, and it looks like everyone wants to return to the carefree fun of the festival. No such luck. Even I jump a little when the bell rings at the end, signalling the end of our apparent learning time. I look across at Hisao while packing my books away. As I predicted, Misha and Shizune have already got him cornered. I should probably step in and steal him away for our trip to town, but Shizune scares me. Just like most people, except more so.

"Say, Hicchan, it's still not too late to join up," comes Misha's voice. "There's a lot of post-festival paperwork for us to complete..."

"Er, sorry Misha, I've... got plans." I guess this is my cue. Misha is already looking at me as I start to walk over. I can guess what she's thinking. Something more... risque than I would consider. She isn't jealous, is she? Then again, seeing how close she is to Shizune... wait. Could Shizune be the jealous one? Hell, I'm starting to feel a little jealous myself... I push the thoughts away. I barely know Hisao, and I never let anyone that close. Although I've let Hisao this far. Maybe I could open up a little more. Perhaps, when the time is right.

Misha laughs as I get closer. Yeah. Risque thoughts. "BWAHAHA! You move fast, don't you, Hicchan? We won't disturb your date any further! Bwahaha!"

Date? How could she think... well, I suppose it looks a bit suspicious. Hisao and I spending time alone together, when the most I've managed before with anyone but Lilly has been a brief session of work in class, or the like. I look at Shizune to get her reaction, but she's deliberately avoiding both my gaze and Hisao's. I can't tell if she's angry, upset, jealous, annoyed, or just bored. Though if she was any of those things, I'd be the last person she made it clear to. Well, the second-to-last. Lilly would take that 'honour'.

My eyes lower, my retreat obvious in my embarrassment. I gently pull on Hisao's sleeve to get his attention. I want to be able to face down Misha and Shizune, but I shy away from the confrontation, and besides, it would just serve to confirm Misha's assumptions. Not everyone has gone either, and a few curious looks are directed our way

"L... let's..." Hisao knows what I'm trying to say.

"Gotcha. Shizune, Misha, I'll see you later. And I'm still not interested in the council."

"Spoilsport," says Misha, grinning at me. Her eyes are closed and her face looks so mischievous, or, dare I say it, flirtatious. Would that be on Shizune's behalf towards Hisao, or her own thoughts? Towards him, or me? I'm guessing not me. I can only speculate idly, but she has always been attached to Shizune at the hip. Almost literally, in fact. She's never given any signs, but I remain curious...

They leave before we do, chatting in sign language as they walk out to the hall. As the classroom empties, Hisao and I are finally left alone.

"Got all your stuff?" he asks. "Let's head off."

We head out together, approaching the school gates. We're not the only ones. Although the majority of students at Yamaku live on campus, a sizeable portion don't, meaning they leave at the same time as Lilly and I usually do on a Monday. As we walk, I move a little closer to Hisao. It's not the same as when I walk close to Lilly, but until now I have always kept Hisao at least at arm's length. Something has changed between us. I can sense it, I want to know if he has too.

I don't show it, though. I try, but something holds me back. I'm so nervous, I can feel the blood draining from my knuckles as I squeeze the straps of my bag. It hurts a little. I keep my mouth closed, my lips tight, my face pointing down. My eyes are staring at the road ahead as we walk. I can't bring myself to acknowledge Hisao, nor any of the other students going into town. I can feel them watching us, judging us. At least when I'm with Lilly

I can get closer, almost hiding my face in her long golden hair, and with us both being girls it's not so strange to see us together. What are people assuming when they see me walking with a boy? No, not a boy. A young man. Misha may have been the first to notice, but she'll hardly be the last. Everyone else will draw the same conclusions about me walking with Hisao...

I have no idea what Hisao's thought process has been, but I hear a strange sound coming from him. It's almost like a suppressed cough, but there's a hint of something else...

"W-what's the matter...?"

"Sorry. For a second there, it looked like you were getting into trouble." He's awfully blunt about it. I don't understand what he's talking about, either way.

"W-w-what do you mean?"

"I think you need to relax a little. We're not going too far, and it's only students around, right?"

I pause for a moment. "R-right." If only it were so easy. I can't get Misha's cheeky smile out of my head, and it bothers me, the thoughts she had. It's not far off the truth, or rather, what I'd like to be the truth, but I feel so conflicted! So nervous, and to be honest, a little scared..."

I realise Hisao has continued speaking. "And you do this every week, don't you?" He has a point, I'll give him that.

"Y-yes. With Lilly." I make a point of saying that. He needs to understand how different the situation is today. Especially after the festival...

"Well, I'm here. Besides, we're not going far. It'll be over before you know it." I suppose so. Normally Lilly and I take a while to finish our shop, but since this time I'm with somebody who has full vision, things might go a bit quicker. I'm almost sad that I won't be spending as much time with Hisao as

we could have done, but if it means avoiding the stares from our fellow students I'd rather get this over with. I smile a little, but the full effect doesn't come through. My hands start to regain a little colour, though, and my grip on the bag straps loosens considerably. We carry on walking in silence, however, I feel a little more confident, enough to actually look up this time.

When we reach the convenience store, no-one else is present. I guess more than a few students were headed for the Shanghai instead, or else the small park here in town. Hisao and I enter and pick out baskets, one for me and Lilly, and one for Hisao himself. I have a recipe in mind, and I need thyme, though Hisao looks confused when he sees the herbs on selection. Maybe rosemary too? Or maybe not. I find myself unconsciously keeping Hisao between myself and the store attendant, even when the attendant pays me no attention. I know it's not a problem for him, as many of Yamaku's students are regular customers here. It's all perfectly natural to him to see disabled people walking through his doors. It's just a habit of mine, but one that's very hard to break.

We walk around the store and I pick out my own required ingredients. When I'm done, I hand my basket to Hisao, along with a few crumpled bank notes. It's the same as what I do with Lilly when we come here together. I'm not exactly confident enough to approach the checkout myself.

"C-c-could you p-please..." I stammer. Hisao pauses for a moment, trying to work out what I need him to do for me.

"Oh, you want me to pay for this?" I nod in reply, but keep my head down. "Sure. Lemme just grab a couple of things..." He quickly moves away and throws some essentials into his own basket.

I stay behind Hisao as he approaches the checkout. I realise my actions aren't quite rational, as the attendant hardly pays any attention to either of us as he scans the items in our baskets. It doesn't change anything for me anyway, and I still keep as hidden as possible.

Our shopping complete, Hisao and I leave the store and begin the long walk home. The streets are relatively deserted, as is the road uphill to Yamaku. Maybe it shows, as I don't appear as reserved and timid as I did on the journey down. Instead, my back is straight, head up, as I carry my own shopping bag in one hand and Lilly's in the other. Things seem like they could be normal.

"So, why all these weird things," asks Hisao. "Mixed spice? Why would you need that in school?"

This is something I can talk about. It might be nice to share something with Hisao, when there's so little else I feel prepared to discuss with him. Food is one of my few passions, similar to my love of chess. I feel glad to be able to avoid the awkward silence as I answer. I still stammer, of course, but that's a regular feature of my conversation even with Lilly.

"I... sometimes... like to m-make food."

"Well, yeah, so do I, but... spices? That's a little more advanced, don't you think?"

"N-not really..." I guess Hisao isn't exactly a connoisseur of fine foods. That being said, some of my 'experiments' have, shall we say, turned out better than others...

"Well, I think it's cool. You'll have to teach me one day." Oh Hisao, you certainly know how to make a girl smile... is my first thought. One that I quickly bury in my reservation. I still smile a little, even so.

"S-sure."

It isn't very long before we're standing outside the dormitories. I look over at Rin's mural on the wall – apparently she managed to finish it in time for the festival, but I don't really know what to make of it myself. It certainly looks... unique. I tear my gaze away and begin to sort out the bags that Hisao and I are carrying. Some of our things have been mixed in together for easier carrying, but I know what I needed and we have Lilly's list to

guide us on her items. Most of the fancy stuff goes into my bag, while Lilly and Hisao both make do with the basics.

"I tell you, you're putting me to shame here..." Hisao has picked up on the stark difference between our grocery needs.

"N-no I'm not... I just..." I reply, flustered at the attention he's giving my ingredients.

I still haven't bought my own 'feminine essentials', but that can wait. I'll ask Lilly if we can go back to town for them soon, when we next visit the Shanghai, or if she could pick them up next time she sees her sister. However soon that may be.

"I'm only joking," says Hisao. He can't stay long, it seems. "I have a stack of homework that I skipped last week, so I must leave now. Will you be alright getting that to your room?" Ever the gentleman. I almost wish he could stay a little longer, but I'm not so comfortable in bringing him back to my dorm just yet. Besides, his work is more important.

"Y-yeah."

"Sure? Okay then. I'll see you tomorrow."

"B-bye." I smile again, ever so slightly, as we say our goodbyes and turn away to our respective dorms. I pick up mine and Lilly's things and make my way to the kitchen in the girls' dorm, carefully labelling my own items and putting them away. I can hear an old song on someone's radio in the common area – Scarborough Fair. I used to have a problem with people taking some of the fancier things I bought, until they realised they had no idea what to do with them in a meal. The petty theft soon stopped, and the quality of the meals the other girls were preparing apparently went up. I take Lilly's items to my own room for now. She has a small fridge and a cupboard in her room for food, since it's easier for her than searching every cupboard downstairs for anything labelled in Braille – not that I can read Braille in the first place.

A few hours later, Lilly returns to the dorm. I'm sitting in my bedroom, walls bare and white and furnishings minimal. I hear a knock on my door, followed by a soft voice that sounds oh so familiar.

"Hanako? It's me, Lilly." It could hardly be anyone else, as Lilly is my only regular visitor. I suppose it could have been Misha, complaining for Shizune about me stealing Hisao away this afternoon, but she would be much louder. Plus, she'd probably try the door to see if it was open first.

"I'm here, Lilly. C-come in." The door is open, as a matter of fact. I lock it when I don't want to be disturbed, which to be fair is most of the time, but my time today has been a bit more enjoyable than usual. I'm in a state of mind where I feel I can almost face the world, if only a little.

Lilly enters the room, closes the door, and skilfully manoeuvres her way towards the solitary chair, feeling her way across. I stay on my bed, legs crossed and clutching a cushion. I rarely take the initiative, but I'm in a good mood right now.

"H... how was your thing with... with Yuuko?"

Lilly looks a touch surprised, but she smiles a little too as she replies. I don't think she really expected me to ask the question myself, before she had the chance to speak.

"It was fine, Hanako. Thank you. Everything's sorted now, and hopefully my own class will be a bit happier about the selection."

"T-that's... good to hear."

"How about you? I trust you managed to get everything you needed?"

"N... not everything..." I say. I still didn't get the things I need for, well, my monthly routine. "I bought all the... all the ingredients I w-wanted, though."

Lilly's face is full of understanding. We've known each other for long enough that she realises what I mean. If I managed to get all the food I

wanted to buy then there's only one thing left that I could particularly need.

"It's okay, Hanako. I managed to pick something up the other day. I'll bring them to your room a little later." How did she manage that without Hisao noticing, if she bought them on Friday? Unless she didn't care if he saw. Unlike me.

"T-that reminds me... I m-managed to get y-your stuff, too..." I get up and take the bag containing Lilly's items from the cupboard in which I'd stored it. Passing it to her, she puts it on the ground next to her cane that rests against the wall.

"Thank you," Lilly says. "So, what did Hisao think of your shopping list?"

She smiles again, but it's a bit wider this time, and a lot cheekier. I blush at this side of Lilly, and at the implications in her comment, though of course she can't see my cheeks turning red.

"I... I'm not... sure..." I stammer more than usual now, and Lilly can most definitely hear it. "I-I think he... he was a b-bit... impressed... to be honest..."

"Impressed? Has he tasted your food yet then?" Sandwiches aside, that stings. But Lilly's face is full of innocence, and I can hardly be angry at her attempt to bring a little humour to the conversation. I smile as well and respond in kind.

"I... I'm sure he'd l-love it more than y-yours..."

"Ah, a low blow indeed." She starts to laugh, and I do too, our voices ringing through the room and into the corridor. It's so rare that I get moments like this, I have to make the most of them when they occur. Maybe if I get the chance with Hisao, we could have moments like this too. If I can gather the courage to actually show my heart to him and reveal myself, everything about me. My thoughts and feelings, my whole life. Maybe in Hisao, I could do something that has happened so few times

before, and never with a boy. I could honestly say that I managed to find a true friend...

8. Act 2, Chapter 2: Of Rice & Saving Grace

Act 2 – Chapter Two: Of Rice and Saving Graces

It's hot. Thee whole day has been nothing but a wave of heat hitting the classroom, and I can't even retreat to the library to cool down. No air conditioning there. Misha decided to have her top buttons undone half the day, which can't have cooled her down much but did serve to have half the male population of our class drooling. I never really thought of her as 'that' type, but no matter. I did feel a stab of jealousy when I saw Hisao looking at one point, but I guess I can't blame him. Much.

By the time the bell sounds for lunch, everyone is lethargic enough from the summer sun that they struggle to even leave the room to go eat. I hang around a little though, hoping to catch someone in particular...

"H... Hisao?"

"Hey there, Hanako," he replies. "What can I do for you today?"

I lift my hand to show Hisao the bag I'm carrying. I don't even need to say anything, my idea is so obvious. I smile and still ask, just as a formality more than anything else, but also because last night I realised I should start taking the initiative a bit more often. After all, that's exactly why I'm here now.

"Um... would you like to have lunch with us again? I... I brought enough for everyone..."

Hisao smiles back at me, though he can see how nervous I was asking him to lunch. It was pretty tough, but I feel better for asking without relying on Lilly to be here. "Awesome. You don't have to be so stiff about it, though."

"Ah... right."

"I take it we're going to the tea room?"

His last comment caught me off guard a little, but although I get a bit flustered I don't regret anything. "P...please. Lilly said she'll meet us in there, so we should... should..."

"Should?"

"...should go ahead together..."

I would be lying if I said this was entirely my idea. But to be fair, I did make the suggestion for Lilly to go on ahead without us. Ultimately, it was a joint effort. But I tried to be at least a bit assertive. Whether Lilly caught on or not, I can't tell, but she seemed pleased that I wanted to spend more time with Hisao. Even if I am still a bit embarrassed by the stares we received on the journey to town yesterday evening.

As I continue to smile, rather sheepishly, at Hisao, he responds to my comment with a clear enthusiasm. "Sounds like a plan. This heat has made me pretty hungry." I sigh with relief, glad to have been successful in my first real attempt to socialise with someone. He packs his things into his bag, and we make our way to the tea room.

When we get there, Lilly is nowhere to be seen. Maybe she was held up, or maybe she decided to give Hisao and I a bit of space before her arrival. Either way, there's no point in waiting for her without knowing what the hold-up is, so I start to lay out the food I've packed. Ultimately, this was my plan, as I suggested last night to Lilly. Seeing Hisao scanning the herbs in the store with his look of bewilderment inspired me to make something extra special. I ended up buying more than I really needed, meaning I had plenty of ingredients to come up with another of my experiments. It's not much, really, and I did make sure to taste it beforehand, though Lilly's judgement may be a little harsher. No less polite, of course, but still...

"I guess Lilly isn't here yet. Should we start without her?" Hisao's voice is one of concern, as if it's rude to begin preparing without Lilly being here. We already discussed it last night, though, the two of us, and Lilly agreed then that if one of us was late, the other should still make good use of the time available. Lunch can often pass quickly at Yamaku, especially in the

tea room, with remarkable speed. I should still say something to assuage Hisao's concern.

"S-she'll be here soon..." I pick up the rice container and try to prise it open, only to meet with what appears to be a tight seal. I swear it wasn't so difficult to open when I was putting the rice in there...

"Here, let me help with that."

Hisao takes the container from me, only to hit the same wall as I did. (Let me guess, did you put this in while the rice was still hot?"

"Y-yes, I was in a rush..." I avert his gaze, looking sheepish at my schoolgirl error. The rice clearly must have expanded while hot, then shrunk and created a vacuum after being shut in the plastic box. The vacuum would have sealed it completely airtight.

"I thought so. It looks like this is wedged shut. We'll need some hot water to get it open." I agree. The hot water will cause the lid to expand and make it much easier to pry the lid off. "But that could be a pain in here. We'd get water everywhere."

I look down at my feet, still embarrassed, but he's right. We could always go to a bathroom to heat the lid, but we're running out of preparation time. Soon enough the lunch period will be over, and we'll have to return to class. It's such a shame, too. I'd used a special blend of spices to give the rice flavour, and I was so looking forward to hearing Hisao's opinion on it...

We're saved, however, by Lilly's timely arrival. "Well, in that case, how about I contribute to today's meal?" As she enters, she carries a bag full of bread rolls and buns. This wasn't part of the plan... though I'm not complaining. "Since you two had a change of plans because of me, I thought I would bring a little something."

"Thanks, Lilly," says Hisao, smiling. "Here, let me get that for you..." He places the rolls and buns in the bowl originally intended for my rice, adding

it to my own platter, before beginning the process of brewing a pot of tea.
"Well, I'm looking forward to this."

As he starts to eat while the water boils, I try not to stare. Even so, I can't help but search his face through the corner of my eye for signs of approval or disgust. I know it tastes good, I tried it myself, but I'd rather hear Hisao say it. He's a bit less biased, after all.

"Not bad, I guess this is made with the stuff you bought yesterday?"

"Y-yes." Spot on. I continue watching Hisao, hoping he'll say something else. I'm glad he seems to like it, but the more feedback I have, the better.

"Well, it was clearly worth it. Thanks, Hanako."

I'm so pleased that he likes it. "I... I wanted to show you this... after yesterday..."

"It's okay. I was just a little surprised at the stuff you were buying." And little does he know that half of it was for his benefit.

"Hanako's always liked to experiment when it comes to food. I think it's good... most... of the time." As Lilly speaks, my eyes turn to her, and her smile. It's only now that I notice her plate hasn't been touched, and her chopsticks lie on the side unbroken. How sneaky can she get? Making Hisao try my food before she dares to! I'm almost impressed, but I try to feel annoyed at her. I can't quite manage it though, given I know as well as she does just how some of my previous concoctions have turned out. Still, Hisao and I will need to get some sort of revenge on her later. Maybe I can deliberately make something terrible, and Hisao can trick her into thinking it's good...

"Well, it's good, and that's all that counts, right?" Exactly! Now you can start eating, Lilly. Go right ahead!

"R-right." I don't let anyone see my thoughts of vengeance as I stammer like usual. Instead, I wait for Lilly to finish filling her plate with the other

parts of the meal, and for Hisao to start eating. I load my own plate and begin.

Later, we're finished with time left before the bell rings and classes restart. The rice is still untouched, but I can always free it and eat it later. I might save some for Hisao tomorrow, if I remember. The rest of the meal is gone, with everyone apparently feeling full. Myself included.

"Thank you Hanako, that was filling," says Lilly, still with a cheeky grin on her face. She ate it anyway, so I claim a victory in my own book. And she did provide the bread, so it would have been poor form for her to not even touch that.

"N-no... thank you for the bread..."

"Yes, it would have been a disaster if not for that." Hisao plays the diplomat, but he's right. I am grateful to her for that saving grace.

"You're both welcome." Lilly's smile turns less cheeky, and more warm, her eyes closed in contentment. "But now, I must be getting back. It's far too easy to be late after eating here."

She has a point, and I wonder to myself if the bell has already sounded. It's sometimes tough to tell in here, though really the entire school is supposed to be wired to ring out the sound wherever people congregate. I guess this must be an older part of the building, or maybe the bell within our earshot no longer works and was never fixed. In any case, the only way to tell is by our watches. It's definitely near the end of the lunch period.

"Yeah," Hisao replies, "I see what you mean. I think we'll just clean up here and then head off." That sounds good to me.

"Well then, good day." We bid Lilly our own farewells as she turns and leaves, the sound of her cane fading into the corridor as she walks. Hisao and I pack everything away, and sit around until the bell suddenly sounds, loud and clear. I guess it does work after all. I never really thought about it before.

Hisao shoots me a glance as we listen to the clamour, but I don't quite feel like leaving just yet. I want to stay a while, savouring the moment. This brief period of rest, with someone who I can be myself with, no matter how nervous I get. If he treated me a bit less delicately then it would be a perfect moment.

"Not... just yet..." I say.

We wait a little longer, my eyes closed in tranquillity. I wonder if this is how Lilly feels whenever she closes her eyes? There's not much more reason for her to close them, after all, as it has little real effect. It's so peaceful. Eventually, Hisao grows impatient.

"We really should go... people will freak out and start a search party if we skip..."

I sigh a little. "You're right." We leave, and make our way back to the classroom. I almost feel like ditching class and going to the library, but would Hisao choose to come with me, or elect to return to lessons? I'd want him to follow, but I have no right to ask him to skip class too. Even if it was his own decision, I'd feel bad for giving him the idea. And if he skips out it's worse than when I do so. As Lilly mentioned to me that he has a heart condition, an absence of Hisao would set off alarm bells for the faculty and nursing staff. His comment about a search party wouldn't be mere hyperbole. At least I have an understanding with Mutou-sensei, plus my condition is hardly life threatening. Not any more, at any rate. They took me off suicide watch a long time ago.

When we reach the classroom, I take a position behind Hisao, as he opens the door, an apologetic look prepared for Mutou-sensei.

"I'm sorry we're late, teacher."

Silence. For a brief moment, I hear nothing, until suddenly a very faint sniggering sound begins to build up into full blown laughter. I can see just a little into the room from my vantage point behind Hisao, and everyone

seems to be holding in their laughter. Misha, of course, can't quite contain herself. I'm annoyed, a little. She could at least make the effort to try...

"Pffff... wahahaha! The lovers return! WAHAHA!"

So, Mutou is just as late as Hisao and I. More so, rather. It's not lost on everyone else that the two of us have arrived together, either. I don't know what to think. Whatever people had in their minds yesterday, the situation now is worse by a hundred-fold. People will talk, and I don't know whether I do feel that way, or if the situation between Hisao and I is nothing more than just friendship. I've only known him for just over a week, after all. But gossip will happen whatever the situation may be, especially where Misha is concerned, and it hardly makes my own circumstances easier to hear it like this.

There's no helping it. I can't run away now, that will only serve to add more 'proof' to Misha's wild speculations. Plus, it would be unfair of me to leave Hisao here on his own to face the stares of the class.

"Yeah, thanks," he says in response to Misha's giggling. "You can calm down now."

Keeping the entire class mentally at bay, I press myself as close to Hisao as possible to hide myself, until we reach his desk. I'm just able to make the short walk, quickly, to my own desk and hide my face in my arms as I sit down. Before he does the same, Hisao follows me and whispers briefly in my ear.

"Don't worry about Misha, she's always like this. I enjoyed myself today. Don't sweat it, okay?"

I nod a little, my head still wrapped by my arms, but stay hidden. I do feel a tiny bit better with Hisao's consolation, but around me I can still hear Misha trying to keep her laughter quiet (a vain hope), along with the muffled giggles from at least half the rest of the class. In fact Suzu is the only one to not be laughing, and that's only because she's asleep, like most of the time.

Even Shizune has a smile on her face, though her amusement obviously can't be heard.

Just as Hisao finishes speaking, he is forced to return to his seat in a rush, as Mutou-sensei decides to enter the room. He's already in the middle of a lecture, apparently forgetting outside the classroom that he wasn't actually speaking to anyone yet.

"...which, of course, is directly proportional to the charge but inversely proportional to the square of the distance..."

As Mutou drones on obliviously, I hear Misha approximate as close to a whisper as she can manage. Somehow, the teacher doesn't pick up on this, but I've never known that man to let anything get in his way once he's on a roll. It sounds like she's talking to Hisao. I don't want to eavesdrop, but I'm definitely interested in hearing what she has to say, if only because I'd rather know if she's saying anything about me, rather than wait until Hisao tells me second-hand.

"The teacher may not have noticed your tardiness, but I did." I lift my head from my arms long enough to see that most of the stares are gone, redirected towards Mutou instead. Misha is leaning across to speak to Hisao, while Shizune is very deliberately looking out of the window. Clearly, Misha is translating for her, but they're being very coy about it.

"I have been instructed to let you off the hook for today," she continues, "but only on one condition."

"Oh? And what would that be?" I'm certain Hisao knows full well what they want him to do. It's all Shizune ever tries to do with most people.

"You have to help us this afternoon!" I knew it. They were desperate for him to help the Student Council yesterday, and I stole him away to go shopping in town. It makes perfect sense they'd try again now. Blackmail though, is a bit extreme... no. For Shizune it's just another perfectly valid tool to get her own way. I can certainly see why she and Lilly don't get along, and I wasn't even part of the council back then...

"Fine. Just for today." Hisao is taking the easy way out, and I can't blame him. A choice between constantly being pestered by Misha and Shizune, or giving in just once with the promise of future relief, is hardly a choice at all. "I've already told you, I'm not joining the council, remember?"

As if they'll keep that in mind. "Of course!" says Misha. "Doing so could be considered... um, considered..." She looks down at her notebook, as if reading from a prepared manuscript given to her by Shizune. Actually, that's probably what she is doing.

"...under duress and hence would be against regulations." She seems so proud of herself, but when have those two ever stuck to the regulations? One rule for some...

Hisao seems to be following the same line of thought. "How very strange of you to be considerate of the regulations now."

"Things should be done by the book!" With her innocent smile and raised finger, Misha seems like she could almost be sincere. I continue to peek, through a gap in my arms, but Shizune continues to look away. She can't see how the conversation is progressing, but she must have a general idea. If she wrote prompts down for Misha to follow, well...

"It's just that the book hasn't been written for every situation, so there are times when it can be ignored." How convenient.

"And yet," Hisao replies, "you two wonder why no-one else wants to be in the Student Council..."

At this, Misha sticks her tongue out at him, before returning to the lecture. I decide to unfold my arms, confident now that no-one is staring any more, and open my book to take notes. The class drags on the same as always.

A couple of hours later, we are finally free. Well, some of us are. While I begin to pack away my notes from the last class, Misha and Shizune gather next to Hisao, each placing a hand on his shoulder. They're taking no chances after yesterday.

"Hey, I said I'd help out, damn..."

"This is just insurance, Hisao, insurance..." Misha smiles brightly, while Shizune looks less amused. I guess the restraint was her idea then. She won't let anything happen to her slave labour, it seems. I'm not sure I feel confident enough to save Hisao from them, but he's been pretty decent to me this past week, enough that I feel obliged to do something to help. Maybe I can give him the opportunity to escape their clutches off his own back.

"H-Hisao?" I call his name as I'm making my way to the door, but if he thinks I want to hang out (and I guess it wouldn't be a bad thing, by any means) then perhaps he'll be able to come up with an excuse to get out of more work for the Student Council. It's not that I don't like Misha, or even Shizune, but seeing them try to force Hisao into doing their work for them just feels... wrong, somehow. It's one of the things that drove Lilly away from the council, after all.

"Oh, hey, Hanako. What's up?" He takes the bait. Shizune spots the opening too, however, and quickly signs to Misha, trying to close the gap in their offensive before Hisao has time to make a move.

"Hey," Misha translates, "what makes you think you've got time to chat?"

"Oh, relax, this won't take long... Hanako, you were saying?"

Thank you, Hisao. "I... I was going to go to the library, and... and I thought..." Looking at Shizune's expression, maybe this wasn't such a good idea. It's not as fierce as it can be, but the slight frown is an early warning sign not to cross her. But I've come this far, I can't retreat now and leave Hisao to their mercy.

"Sorry Hanako, but Hisao has to come with us. He's got work to do." Shizune signs again to Misha, and my fears of reprisal are confirmed. "Oh! But you can help too if you'd like."

Sure thing, Misha... not. "Um..."

"So, how about it, Hisao?" Misha and Shizune both turn their faces towards him, looking for an answer.

"Hey, Shizune. I know I said I'd help, but I forgot I'd already made plans. Besides, I helped out more than my fair share last week, didn't I? I promise, I'll make it up to you some other time." It's true, he did work pretty hard with me helping Lilly's class on their stall decorations. And many of our class didn't get involved at all, yet still enjoyed the festival regardless of their own input. It's remarkably unfair of the pair to expect Hisao to do even more now, though I suspect Shizune is just looking for excuses to spend time with him. It wouldn't surprise me. Again, I feel a strange pang of jealousy, but I'm still uncertain of my own feelings. I do enjoy spending time with him myself, but we barely know each other. Even so, he's followed my cue about the library. Shizune doesn't seem best pleased, but she pulls Misha away for a moment as they sign rapidly to each other.

Eventually, they return, and Misha gives the translation. "Well, you have a point there. To be honest, we were only going to spend the rest of the budget on cakes. So, if you're not there, it works out better. More cake for us! Wahaha..."

Isn't that the very definition of corruption? When we reach the library I resolve silently to open a dictionary and look up the word, just to check that a picture of Shizune and Misha isn't staring back from the pages.

They leave quickly, finally allowing Hisao and I to be alone again. "Well," he starts to say, "that was a lot easier than I thought it was going to be. Last week those two were like bloodhounds. Or prison guards. Or maybe prison guards bred from bloodhounds..."

What.

I'm reminded of that strange boy I met in Lilly's class last week. What was his name? Kenji?

"...never mind," Hisao continues. I agree with that sentiment completely. "Anyway, should we go to the library?"

I smile a little and reply in the affirmative. "S-sure." The journey doesn't take long, but I stick close to Hisao as we walk, avoiding the looks our fellow students give us. When we reach the library, I scan the stacks for a familiar face. Sure enough, Yuuko is working here today. I make my way to her and whisper a request in her ear. Next time Hisao and I play chess, I'm certain to win... though I'd rather he not find out my plans, of course.

"Um, you' find that in non-fiction," she replies, "but I'm not sure where exactly. If you want I can look it up..."

"N-never mind." I don't want Hisao to know what I'm up to, so it's better that Yuuko doesn't show me where to find the book I'm searching for. I guess it's obvious that it would be in non-fiction, but the stacks aren't too difficult to navigate, especially considering how often I come here. My request to Yuuko was on the off chance that she would be quicker at searching, but I can easily find what I'm after by myself.

"Hey Yuuko, what's all this about?" It seems Hisao's figured out that something is up. His suspicion has been piqued.

"Oh, Hisao... Hanako was just looking for a book on..." No! She'll ruin my plans!

"N-nothing..." I quickly interject.

"A book on nothing? In the non-fiction section?"

"I... I was just..." It's no use. I can't stop him from being suspicious, and my thoughts go back to a previous conversation between the two of us, where Hisao said that people are inspired to ask more questions when I say 'nothing'. It's the same situation now. He stays silent, however, but as we both look at Yuuko, my eyes pleading her to not tell him, I can see the pressure of keeping the secret is too much. That's the last time I ask her to keep quiet about anything...

"Yuuko, what did..." Hisao's final unfinished comment pushes her over the edge.

"Chess! She's looking for a chess book!" Thanks very much.

"Y-Yuuko..." I begin.

"I'm sorry Hanako... it just slipped out..." I guess I can forgive her. It wasn't really important. But I'd like to be able to match, or even best, Hisao in ability, and studying a bit more on my chess skills would have helped a lot. Now he knows I'm going to try and beat him next time we play. What if he decides he could use some extra study too?

"Well," he says, "it's not exactly a secret any more. Come on, I'll give you a hand. I should really brush up on my skills, too."

"O-okay." That's exactly what I didn't want to happen, but it can't be helped. We make our way into the non-fiction section, leaving Yuuko behind as she returns to the main desk. It's easy enough to find the right section, on games and general activities, and between a card trick book and a guide to kid's games we find a solitary chess book. 'Chess Tactics for Champions.'

I see in the corner of my eye my companion is eyeing it eagerly. I don't give him the chance to take it though, before I quickly grab it and clutch it to my chest. I will definitely improve my chess skills before we next play! Just see if I don't, Hisao...

"Well, I guess that's yours then," he says. I smile mischievously as Hisao feigns a sigh of defeat. "Mind if I borrow it when you're finished?"

"S-sure," I say. It will be too late for him by that point. "I... I just haven't really played against anyone but L-Lilly before, so I thought..."

"Ha, well, it's not like I'm a master or anything. I just played a bit before..." He pauses briefly. Maybe he's starting to infringe on a personal topic, just as I do when my life before Yamaku comes up. I usually avoid the discussion in those cases, so I can't complain when Hisao does it. Or maybe he's talking about his condition? He still hasn't spoken to me about it, with the little I do know coming from Lilly. I feel no need to bring up awkward

questions on what she told me by revealing that I know something, even if it is barely anything that I know.

"...before I came here." Yes, the latter case seems more likely from this concluding statement. I feel concern though, so although I tread carefully, I do choose to bring the subject up.

"Are... are you alright?"

"Yeah, I was just remembering something..." Hisao takes a book from the nearest shelf, something about roller coasters, and it's clear the topic is done with. I won't push him for details, and if he isn't ready to talk then I fully understand. It's the same way I feel almost constantly. "Well, we've both got books now, should we go sit down?"

I nod, and we slowly make our way to the usual spot, with the large beanbags. As we both begin to read, I find myself drawn in to the knowledge I'm gaining by choosing this chess book. I constantly refer back to other sections, imagining in my mind the best ways to use different positions of both black and white to my advantage, the best openings to use based on what little I've seen of Hisao's playing style, and how to use those openings to gain the upper hand in the mid-game. I realise that I've overlooked several important strategic elements, such as using the Fianchetto to maintain a strong control of the centre of the board, and backing up the bishops with my knights. I realise how sacrificing my bishops doesn't necessarily give me an advantage when attacking my opponent's knights, and how a staggered pawn offensive can be broken if I can just get behind the enemy lines quickly.

It's only after I've exhausted myself considering a full game between Hisao and myself that I notice him watching me. I guess his book wasn't quite so interesting. Rather than my scars, though, uncovered by my own unconscious reflex brushing back my hair, he's looking at the book, watching me read. I hope he isn't trying to figure out my next strategy... I don't feel so worried. I know by now he doesn't care about my scars, or what I look like. He cares about me, and that's such a rare thing that I

continue to let him stare without comment. The next time I look up from the book, Hisao has turned his head away and Yuuko has come across to meet us.

"Um... sorry to interrupt, but I have to close the library now."

"Already?" Hisao sounds disappointed, and I don't blame him. I feel the exact same way. This afternoon has been so nice and calm, the two of us just hanging out, no need for conversation. The time has flown by so quickly...

"Do you want to check out those books? I can do it on the way out..."

I doubt Hisao will want to properly borrow his chosen book, judging by the lack of interest he showed over the past couple of hours. I'd like to read more about the tactics I've been learning though, so I reply positively. "Please."

"I'm done," says Hisao. "I'll drop this one back on the way through. It wasn't as interesting as I first thought." That much was fairly obvious. I use a small piece of paper as a bookmark and follow Yuuko to the main desk, while Hisao returns his roller coaster book. It still takes Yuuko a few tries to get the book to scan, though. She still believes it's down to her own clumsiness, even though I know full well the computers here haven't been updated in at least the past five years...

"Oh... there we go. Third time lucky. Since this is a non-fiction book, you can only have it for a week."

"That's okay." I'm fine with that. If needed, I can copy some of the more useful parts into a notebook, but I'll have plenty of time over the next week to study further. As Hisao joins us, Yuuko shuts the computer down and walks with us to Yamaku's regular hallways.

In the corridor, she looks briefly at her watch, and gasps in shock. "Argh! I didn't think it was this late already...!"

"But you're the one that told us you had to close..." I share Hisao's confusion here, just a little.

"Yes, but, I know, but, that was before I looked at the time! I'll see you later..." With that, Yuuko flees, rushing off like Emi (albeit less pink). I'm still puzzled as to why she decided to close the library without knowing the time, but it doesn't really matter, I suppose.

"I guess all librarians really are neurotic." Hisao smiles a bit as he thinks of some joke that I don't understand.

"Huh?"

"Ah, never mind. I was just thinking that I've never met a librarian that can organise their time, no matter how good they are with their books."

Maybe he knew a few librarians like Yuuko before coming here? I certainly did, books being a great way when I was growing up of keeping the world at bay. "Oh... I k-know what you mean..." I smile again, reflecting as I do that I've been smiling a whole lot more since Hisao came into my life. It's then that I realise the time myself. "I-I have to get back..."

"Yeah, me too. I didn't realise it was this late. Thanks for letting me hang out with you."

There's not much need for Hisao to thank me, even though I did kind of help save him from Misha and Shizune. I accept his thanks regardless. "N-no problem."

"I'm going to my dormitory room now anyway, so do you mind if I tag along?"

"O-okay." I frown slightly, but that's more habit than anything. I really don't mind, and we're going the same way so it makes no sense for one of us to wait until the other has left before setting off ourselves. My pace is brisk though, if only to minimise the chance that I get caught by anyone other than Hisao. More questions wouldn't be great for me, where Hisao is

concerned, and there's every chance that Shizune or Misha will still be around, occupied as they were after school hours with 'council business'.

When we reach the dormitories, I turn to see that Hisao is breathing a bit more heavily. I guess he had to jog to keep up with me. "Man, you walk pretty fast," he says. "I used to play in a soccer club, and you manage to outpace me." I blush a little, but smile again, looking down. I'm slightly embarrassed, yes, but it's fun to think that I've beaten Hisao at something. My smile turns slightly more cheeky, a change that isn't lost on my companion. We stay silent for a brief moment, but it doesn't have the air of awkwardness such quiet periods between us usually do. Eventually, the silence is broken.

"Here you go," says Hisao. "See you in class tomorrow?"

"S-sure." I promise myself that I'll be there tomorrow, and make sure to not skip and go to the library again. I've made a commitment now to Hisao with that one comment, and I most definitely intend to keep it.

9. Act 2, Chapter 3: Hatter, Hare and Mouse

Act 2 – Chapter Three: The Hatter, the Hare, and the Mouse

When I arrive at breakfast this morning, Lilly is already present. I usually try to get to breakfast early, to avoid the stares, but today I decided to turn up a bit later than normal. Maybe it's a sign of my new-found resolve to open myself up a bit more. I wonder what my therapist will say when I see her this weekend? Our session last weekend was cancelled because of the festival, but we have another meeting scheduled for Sunday, not that I ever look forward to them, but there's not much that can be done about it.

"H-hi, Lilly," I say quietly as I approach with some food, trying not to disturb her too much. She looks quite deep in thought. It's still not as late as it could be, and the cafeteria is still pretty quiet.

"Ah, is that Hanako?"

"Y... yes. Are y-you okay?"

"I'm fine," she replies, smiling. "It's nice to find you here this late." It's not much later, but she still notices. Her watch is one of those that actually tells you the time.

"I... I decided t-to be a bit... later..." I stammer. "I s-slept in a little."

"That's quite alright, Hanako. Actually, I wanted to catch you before you went to class this morning."

"O-oh?"

"I met Hisao here this morning. It seems he couldn't sleep and decided to eat early."

What did he say to her about yesterday, I wonder? For that matter, I wonder why he didn't decide to go running, if he was up that early? I guess Emi would have been targeting him, I've seen her speaking to him a few times

since she bumped into him in the corridor and knocked him down. Not to mention the looks she's given him in the corridor, whether he noticed or not. Given his heart, I suspect the Head Nurse asked her to keep an eye on him.

"I was wondering, Hanako, if you'd be up for a little tea party tonight, in my room? It's been quite a while since the last time..."

I'm certainly up for that, tea parties with Lilly are always nice. But I'm also certain that she has more than that in mind... "S-sure..."

"That's good to hear. I also wanted to ask, if you said yes... How would you feel about inviting Hisao along?"

She must have brought it up with him before, after dropping that comment about seeing him earlier. I can't refuse now. Then again, I'm not sure I want to say no. I am a bit annoyed at Lilly's obvious attempts to play matchmaker, though. Still, it might be nice to have Hisao along for an evening tea party.

"Um... I g-guess... that would b-be okay... with m-me..."

"Excellent. I'll let him know then." You say that, Lilly, but you've obviously already asked him, and he's clearly already said yes. I can't blame Lilly for the little white lie though, so I let it slide and begin to eat my breakfast. Who knows, maybe this evening will be rather enjoyable...

The day carries on as normal. I turn up to classes, though I don't get a chance to speak to Hisao at any point. He doesn't join us in the tea room for lunch today either, being dragged away by Emi to eat on the roof with herself and Rin. My guess is that she wants to monitor what he's eating, since I saw the Nurse giving him funny looks in the corridors over the past few days. If it helps his condition though, I have no complaints. I keep my head down and work on the day's problems, eat with Lilly, make my way back to my dorm room after the lectures finish, and read some more. The sun is already low in the sky, casting an orange glow on Yamaku, when I change into my nightgown, join a pyjama-clad Lilly in her room, and sit down to prepare the tea and wait for Hisao.

It's not very long before he arrives, a knock on the door signalling his presence.

"Is that you, Hisao?" Lilly calls. "The door is open, you can come in."

The door opens rather slowly as a familiar face peers around the corner. I watch him as he takes in the quaint, antiquated look of the room, gazing at every piece of furniture and every defining aspect of Lilly's decorative style, before turning to the pair of us. I am fully conscious of how my scars are that bit more visible in my nightgown, even when I bought them specifically to keep as much of my body hidden as possible. I'm also quite shy at Hisao seeing me in this and nothing more, adding to my sudden need to be hidden. Old habits kick in and I tense up, shoulders forward and hands hidden between my legs, my head pointing down even though my eyes look up at Hisao's face. I smile briefly, just a shadow of a thing, pleased that he could come after all despite my insecurities.

"There's no point in you standing in the doorway, Hisao." Sometimes I wonder if Lilly really is blind, or just a very good actress, but that's not fair to her. To cope with her lack of sight she has trained her other senses remarkably well. Especially if she could tell that Hisao hadn't come into the room properly yet. Maybe she guessed from not hearing the door close? She speaks again as Hisao enters.

"My my, I'm afraid this really is a small room for the three of us. Would you like to take a seat?"

Hisao walks over to the low table and sits on the floor with Lilly and I. As he approaches I see his eyes dart towards Lilly, pointing downwards... Does he think I didn't notice just what he was looking at? I feel bad for my friend, guilty at my smile, but I manage to stifle the giggle at Hisao's natural male tendencies before he notices me watching him.

"Well now, how about some tea. Hanako, could you please pour?" It would be my pleasure, Lilly.

"S... sure. Hi... sao... would... would you... would you like..." I don't know what's wrong with me. I feel so much more nervous now than I have at any point since my very first meeting with Hisao, back in the library that afternoon. I still feel exposed in my flimsy nightgown, even if it is too big for me. It's harder to interact here with Hisao too, in a more casual environment yet with Lilly present (possibly scrutinising my every move in her own attempts to help me). And in the back of my mind, I know that soon enough I'm going to withdraw even more than usual, a particular date approaching fast. Hisao hasn't been here for that in previous years, and I don't know yet what he'll make of it. It worries me...

He comes to my rescue here, though. "I would love some tea. Do you need a hand?"

"N... no, I'm fine..." It's true, I'm okay with pouring the tea. I'm just stammering even more than I normally do. I am grateful to him. "Thank you."

I can see Lilly smiling with her head in my direction, even though I try not to make eye contact with her. For Hisao's benefit, of course, rather than Lilly's.

"Been a tiring day?" he asks me.

"Y... yeah." If I'd been able to speak to him earlier then he'd already know, especially given my anticipation of this evening building up during the day and making me focus less on other equally important tasks. I actually struggled for once with the problems set in class today! I put this to the back of my mind, and pour the tea without incident. Almost without incident.

I gently clip the edge of a cup with the teapot, a 'cling' sound clearly audible despite the subtleness of the collision. In my nervousness I can't help but gasp slightly, even though my rational mind knows there's nothing to be worried over. Maybe I really want to impress Hisao at this point. I don't know why, but there's something about him that keeps driving me to get

closer, to open myself up to him as I've never done with anyone but Lilly before.

"It's okay, Hanako. There's no need to be nervous." Lilly's words are soothing and calm me down just a little. I'm still timid in my actions and attitude, but I continue pouring and manage to prepare three cups of tea for us without further hassle.

"Thank you, Hanako."

"Yeah, thanks."

"Y-you're welcome..." I reply to them both. As we all sip our tea, Hisao lets out a relaxed breath.

"This is nice, it's so different from any tea I had before..."

"Looks like you picked the right one, Hanako," Lilly responds to Hisao's comment. "You've done well, even if it was a bold move."

I smile again at Hisao, deliberately and with much more emotion than earlier. "I'm glad you like it..." I sip my own tea, feeling happier and more relaxed myself. When Lilly told me what she had planned this morning, I thought of a plan of sorts, confronting her with it at lunch while Hisao wasn't around. I asked if I could choose the tea we served based on how I saw Hisao, and what I felt he would like best. It was indeed a bold move, and Lilly knew that (well, I hope she did at least). I'm pleased that I made the right choice.

"So, Hisao, are you enjoying yourself?" Lilly's change of topic hardly bothers me. I'm simply content to discover I know Hisao a bit better than I previously thought I did.

"Yeah, it's relaxing. Almost like I'm not in the school any more. Do you do this often?"

"Quite often, but not as often as we take tea in the school building." That's a regular occurrence, only stopping when either Lilly or myself are busy or when something else comes up, whereas these evening tea parties might happen once a week, or even less, depending on circumstances.

Hisao moves to take another sip of tea, but quickly brings his cup back down from his lips. Looking inside briefly I can see that it's empty. "That was delicious," he says. "Thank you, Hanako, Lilly."

"You're welcome," I reply without a single stammer.

"Yes, you're most welcome, Hisao," says Lilly. "It's nice to have a third person here."

"Well," he replies to us both, "any time you need someone to fill that position, I'm always available. Always." As he finishes speaking, Lilly moves her hand to her mouth in an attempt to hide a large yawn. She fails miserably to conceal it, but I don't blame her. I feel just the same way.

"Pardon me," she says. "I think I'm a little tired."

"I think we're all a little tired," I concur.

"My my, how astute tonight, Hanako." I think Lilly is being playful in her teasing, but at the same time I'm happy she's noticing that I can take the initiative sometimes. This is as far as I go in tonight's exchanges though, at least for now. Baby steps, after all. The best way to change for the better is to do so over time, in moderation. I think I read that in a book somewhere. "We really should head to bed," Lilly continues. "We all have class tomorrow."

"Yeah," Hisao agrees. "I should go."

"Thank you for your presence, Hisao," says Lilly.

My own sentiments match those of Lilly perfectly. "Th... thanks. You'll come again?"

"Not even a whole army could stop me.." I smile at this, but again I'm reminded of that weird Kenji guy.

"I'm impressed by your determination, Hisao," Lilly says. Surely she knows what Kenji comes out with more than I do? I've met the man once, whereas she shares classes with him every day. Hisao's determination is still pretty impressive though.

"Either way," he says, "you're right. We'd best get going." Hisao stands and starts to walk to the door. As he approaches, I respond in kind, following him slightly. He must notice, as he stops and turns to look at me before he opens the door. "Are you coming with me?"

I blush, brighter than I could imagine possible, my entire face the same colour for the first time in ages. What does he think I'm trying to do, follow him all the way home? In a manner of speaking, that is. "No... I... not... this room... isn't..."

"It's okay, I was only joking." He smiles at me, brushing off the thought that I was actually stalking him.

"Oh... okay... good night..." I'm a little relieved, and my face turns a bit less red. My hot cheeks feel slightly less warm now.

"Good night, Hanako. Good night, Hisao." I can fully understand her wanting us to leave soon. As we all agreed, we're all feeling pretty tired by now.

"Night all." Hisao turns around again and leaves, holding the door open for me to pass through. I may be annoyed when people treat me like a glass vase wrapped in paper and cotton, but being smothering is one thing and being a gentleman is another. I whisper my thanks as the door to Lilly's room closes after us.

I'm just about to head down the hall and enter my own room when Hisao stops again and looks me right in the eyes. "Hey, Hanako, you know, you

don't have to be nervous around me or anything. I mean, we're friends, right?"

If only it was as easy as that for me to stop being nervous. Something else I read a while ago was that habits take ten weeks of constant development to form, and I've had much more than ten weeks of keeping everyone I meet at bay. I don't want to be nervous around Hisao, but I can't be fixed overnight. I'm not so certain I can be fixed over months, either. Lord knows my various therapists have all tried. What he says about us being friends, though, that's new. It's something I can feel too, and I don't disagree with him, but it's a strange situation for me, to have another friend. However, I am glad. It's not been long, but yes, he's correct.

"R-right. We're... friends."

"If you ever want to hang out or anything, just let me know. We still need to have that chess rematch, remember?"

He remembered that? I could hardly forget, given how much I've been poring over the pages I copied from that chess book Yuuko lent me. I didn't think Hisao would be as eager, though. No matter, I'll beat him next time anyway. "S-sure... b-but I don't think you'll win..."

He smiles, matching my own. "It wouldn't be any fun if it was easy."

I chuckle, just barely, but I also feel a yawn coming on, so I stifle my laugh as quickly as it begins. "G-good night, Hisao..." With that, I walk across to my own door and disappear. I reach my bed, draw back the duvet and lie down, and fall asleep before I even hit the pillow...

10. Act 2, Chapter 4: The Mirror

Act 2 – Chapter Four: The Mirror

I choose not to tell Lilly about my plans.

I've thought long and hard about this. Waking up in the middle of the night, worrying about my friendship with Hisao, how I know about his heart and how he knows next to nothing about me and how I got my scars. It's not right that we should be getting closer and becoming friends when I can't even bring myself to tell him such basic facts about my life. Isn't that what friends do? They don't have secrets from each other.

Last night, I made my mind up. I decided I would tell Hisao how I lost my family and how I ended up at Yamaku. It's up to him whether he accepts me then or not. Besides, it might be good to finally tell someone other than Lilly. My therapist keeps asking me to open up to her, but I never do. I can't handle it. With Hisao, though, maybe I've managed to find someone I can truly be myself with.

The day starts out alright, even if Mutou-sensei's lecture is more boring than usual. I briefly see Lilly as she's leaving the female dorms, and we chat a little about mundane things and the tea party the previous night. However, I don't give away what I plan to do. I do see Hisao in class, but we don't get a moment to talk, and I realise that speaking here, with everyone else able to listen in (Misha especially), wouldn't be a good idea. I can't ask Hisao to talk somewhere else, though. If Misha were to spot me trying to be casual, or inconspicuous, while chatting to him, she'd immediately think something was up and come barging in with a smile on her face, her voice booming some assumption about our apparent status as a couple.

Instead, I decide to retreat as usual at lunchtime. I don't go to the tearoom today, instead visiting the library. Even Lilly's presence would be enough to put me off telling Hisao about my past. I want it to be just the two of us, and going to the library gives me time to think of a way to catch him alone somewhere.

As I settle down into my beanbag, I look at the cover of the book I've chosen this time. A man and his shadow. I almost feel as if I'm the shadow in that picture, but fighting for once to step away from the wall and become the person instead. It's a long, hard, road. One that I'm willing to take. I open the pages and begin to read. 'Dance Dance Dance' is the title, another work from Murakami. Every time I read his books I can sympathise with his themes, but it never gets any easier, trying to match my own issues with the underlying context of the words he writes. For me, the challenge is to overcome everything he writes about and break through the loneliness, but until now I've never quite been able to do so. Maybe I finally have a reason though, with Hisao's support.

"Hi, Hanako. How's it going?" Speak of the Devil, and he shall appear. Hisao's voice startles me a little and I look up at him as he flops down onto another of the beanbags opposite me.

"Hello, H-Hisao. I'm fine." I'm actually very pleased to see him. Nobody else is here save Yuuko, and she's at the other end of the library busy with her work. This saves me from having to find a way of getting Hisao alone without it seeming contrived and awkward, which would almost certainly end up being the case. He looks surprised though, to see me smiling at him. I guess it's pretty rare that I do except in special situations. I usually look more frightened and nervous rather than happy.

"Good to hear. How's that book? I've heard it's a trip." I didn't know Hisao was familiar with the works of Haruki Murakami. Then again, he's one of the country's more prolific and influential authors, so it's not too surprising that he would know the book, however briefly.

"I-it's good... I think... I've only j-just started it, so I d-don't really know."

"Fair enough. Let me know how it goes, I may borrow it once you're done."

"S-sure." I wonder if he's read any of Murakami's other books? If so, what insight would that have given him regarding me? I read them because I can relate to the themes and characters, but what could Hisao have gained from the stories himself?

I turn back to the book, but I find myself unable to concentrate. This is too good an opportunity to speak to Hisao, and I can't let myself pass it up. However, I'm too nervous to begin speaking. I've never told anyone but Lilly what happened all that time ago – even my therapist had to make do with the official reports and medical observations. Every time I look up I meet Hisao's eyes and duck down again, afraid to engage with him and begin the conversation that I so desperately want to have.

He's noticed it too. "What's up? You look like a prairie dog on lookout." An apt simile, I suppose.

"N-... it's nothing," I reply with an air of evading the question.

"I've told you before, 'nothing' means 'something' when you say it like that."

He has a point. And I do want to tell him. I wriggle around a little, fidgeting awkwardly and trying to screw up the courage to finally bare my soul to somebody.

"I... I was in an accident." I've begun, so I guess I'd better finish.

"Accident? Just now? Are you alright?" Hisao's first reaction is understandable, but he doesn't realise what I'm trying to say. In response I shake my head, hair flying around as I move.

"N-no. When I was y-younger. When I... when I was..."

"It's alright, Hanako," Hisao says. He's realised what I'm trying to do. "You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to."

I shake my head again as I sink a little into the beanbag. I have to do this. "N-no. I want... I have to tell you." As I tell the story of what happened, I gain a little strength with every word. It's hard, yes, but I've faced tougher times than this. I have to endure! I have to be strong and continue to the end.

"When I was young... I was in a fire. M-my house b-burned down, and I nearly... I nearly didn't make it. A-after that... I was alone..." As I speak I can feel the tears building in my eyes. I haven't told Hisao the whole truth. I can't stand remembering why I managed to survive. The coming days will be tougher, that date looming just a little more than a month or two away. It's better he knows the reasons now rather than later.

I feel a hand touching mine, and without looking down or wiping away the tears I know Hisao has reached across to comfort me. "It's okay, Hanako. You don't have to keep going."

"B-but... I have to..." Don't you see, Hisao? I need to do this.

"Why?" he asks. "What brought this on?"

I feel bad for the little white lie, but I don't want Hisao to know just how long I've been aware of his own secrets. "L-last night Lilly t-told me about your heart... a-and I... I didn't think it was f-fair."

"Fair?" He looks puzzled, a frown across his face, my hand still clutched in his.

"T-that I knew about you b-but you didn't know about me..."

He squeezes my hand a little, to reassure me. "Don't be silly. But yes, I have a heart condition. What I didn't tell Lilly is that I had my first attack when a girl confessed to me."

Confessed? As in a confession of love? I feel that sharp pang of jealousy again, just a little one, but present nonetheless. "R-really?"

"Really," he replies. "I haven't heard from her for a while though, so I guess it's all over. So now, we both know a little more about each other. But you don't have to talk about things if you don't want to."

He still doesn't realise that I truly wanted to tell him what happened. I still do. But I realise that for now, enough has been said. Baby steps, after all. I

can always bring the subject up again another time, but it's still early days, and I hate to be reminded of that day. I can't help but think of the recovery, those weeks that turned into months of sitting in a room alone, a completely sterile environment, only to be told that nothing could be done about my scars and to realise that my life would forever be blighted not only by my appearance, but by my isolation. The smell of the hospital, the white-washed walls, feeling sorry for the victims even worse than me in their sterile pods completely cut off from the world. Trying to return to my old life until everyone I knew and thought was my friend turned on me, showing their hatred not for who I once was, but for what I had become. Moving on to the orphanage, where I was finally treated with decency, until every child was taken home while parents passed me by without a second glance. My eventual arrival at Yamaku.

My memories flash by as we sit in silence. I know that one day I'll tell Hisao all of this, but for now I'm happy that he at least knows the basics. Maybe I can really move on someday.

"T-thank you, Hisao. I... I haven't told many people about this."

"To be honest, I haven't told many people about my... circumstances, either." It seems that Hisao and I are more alike than I first thought. I smile again, genuinely and full of warmth.

"T-then I won't tell a-anyone either."

""Deal." Hisao's hand still clasps mine, but quickly adjusts to form a handshake, one which I gladly match. As we shake hands, the warning bell sounds for the end of lunch. "Well then, we'd better head back to class, eh?"

"S-sure." We walk back to the classroom in near silence, the quietness only broken when Hisao reveals he forgot to let me know something. Apparently Lilly wishes to speak to me later, after her class rep duties are complete. We slowly make our way back to lessons as the afternoon sun shines through the windows, illuminating my path forward.

The classes drag on, as boring as they were this morning. At least I'm here though, not skipping again. I notice I've been cutting classes less since Hisao joined us. Maybe he's been a good influence on me? The clock ticks our lives away as the day continues, until the bell finally sounds for the end of school. I begin to head towards the tea room to meet with Lilly, curious as to what she wishes to discuss, before realising she's too busy today. I return to my room instead to wait for her.

A while later, a knock on my door drags me yet again from my continued reading. "Hanako? It's Lilly. Can I come in?"

"Y-yes..."

The door opens and Lilly walks in slowly, her cane tapping for any obstacles that could impede her progress. "Hello, Hanako. I trust that Hisao was good enough to pass on my message this afternoon?"

"Yes, he... he did. W-what was it y-you wanted to speak... about?" Even when I'm with Lilly I can't avoid stuttering. Maybe one day I'll overcome it, but until then...

"I just wanted to know how you were feeling. I was proud of you yesterday, you know."

"T-thanks..."

She continues, "How were things with Hisao today?"

"They w-were... good. Um..." I pause, unsure of whether to continue.

"Yes?"

"I... I..." Suddenly, in a quick burst, I tell her. "We talked about my past today."

For the first time in a while, Lilly looks shocked. Not in a bad way, but rather in the sense that she doesn't quite know what to say. "W-what do you

mean? Your past...?"

"I t-told him what happened... how I got my s-scars..."

"Oh, Hanako, you didn't have to do that..." Lilly's reaction is just the same as Hisao's. I appreciate that they want to protect me, but they still don't understand. I can't come to terms with what happened if I can't tell anyone.

"I... I had t-to tell him... it wasn't right that... I knew a-about him and h-he didn't... about m-me..." The tears are returning, but I resolve to stay strong. I won't let myself cry. It doesn't matter that Lilly can't see me, I won't let any tears fall this time. "He t-told me about his heart... his f-first heart attack..."

"Hanako..." She sighs a little. "What did he say? Although I guess it's okay if he wanted to keep it private..."

"I... I think H-Hisao would be better off t-telling you..." I wouldn't feel right letting Lilly in on what he said, not when Hisao gave me that knowledge in confidence.

"I understand. Hanako, are you sure you're okay?"

"Y-yes. I'm fine now." I'm not lying. I feel strangely calm, despite the tears. It's as though a great weight was holding me down, and now it's gone. Like a new chapter has opened in my friendship with Hisao, a brand new story where finally we can be on the same level. As I consider this, Lilly and I chat a bit more about various topics, though I know she still worries about me even when we stop speaking about the day's events. Soon enough she leaves, and I prepare for bed. For once I sleep soundly, no nightmares despite what is still to come. My mind is clear.

11. Act 2, Chapter 5: Not So Black And White

First of all, apologies for the very late posting of this chapter. Stuff came up that gave me much less time to write this past month, and so Hanako's Story had to take the backseat temporarily. Hopefully now I have time to write again, things will be much better in terms of update times, and hopefully this next chapter is good enough to make up for the recent lack of activity. On a more important note, I would like to thank Guest Poster of the Katawa Shoujo forums for his permission in using one of his original characters for this chapter. Miss Yumi does not belong to me and is the creation of Guest Poster, and I am very grateful to him for allowing me to use the character as I have done. I urge you all to check out Sisterhood, the work where Miss Yumi originates, and give him your support. It's definitely worth a read :).

Act 2 – Chapter Five: Not So Black And White

It's been two weeks since my last session with Miss Yumi. Two weeks as well since Hisao started at Yamaku. Last weekend was the festival, of course, so anything like therapy sessions and school activities were postponed to account for everyone being busy. As such, I've not had a chance to tell her about the recent... developments.

I'm still a bit anxious about seeing Miss Yumi now. Things became very awkward between us a while ago, just before Lilly came to live in the dorms here. I'd already seen Lilly around Yamaku but she used to live away from the school, with her sister Akira, so I didn't really know her then. I'd been having therapy for all my time here, but of all the therapists I'd seen Miss Yumi was the only one who really started to understand me. The only person I could bring myself to act naturally around. I still wouldn't open up to her properly, but we made so much more progress than I had ever done with anyone else. So naturally I thought that our professional relationship would progress into something closer to... well, to friendship.

The rejection hurt. I understood why she couldn't be my friend, her position as a therapist meant it would be, to use her own words, inappropriate. It

wasn't that Miss Yumi didn't like me, nor that she didn't respect me, but simply that a friendship between us wouldn't ever be able to come to fruition. She told me then that "a good therapist will never try to become your friend, and a good friend will never try to become your therapist." I didn't want to believe her at first, and it seemed like all the good work we'd done was regressing, like we were back at the beginning with no hope of improvement. She took a break from work then, so I had some time to think about things, which did help. Eventually we managed to gain that level of understanding again, but it was tough.

Lilly was a godsend then. She moved into the dormitories, a year ago now, taking the room of a girl next door to me who had not long moved out. She reminded me a lot of a younger Miss Yumi, or perhaps Miss Yumi reminds me of a much older Lilly. We quickly became friends – it helped that she was not only persistent, but also that Lilly couldn't see my scars. She did feel them eventually, after we became close and I began to open up to her a bit more. She asked my permission and I granted it, though with a great deal of reluctance. The shock on her face was very cleverly hidden, but I still sensed it there for a brief instant. Looking back, I don't think Lilly ever expected my scars to be as bad as they are, and she only felt the ones on my face and neck that time. Nevertheless, the presence of someone who I could call a real friend finally allowed me to move on from the embarrassment I suffered with my request to Miss Yumi.

It was months before we were back to normal, and even now I still regret it sometimes. Still, at least I know that she's only looking out for my best interests. It's hard, but I understand that she wants what's best for me, and will do everything she can to help me. That's all Miss Yumi wants. I still feel like the trust we had was broken, but maybe with more time, we can get it back...

I knock on the door to her office as always and wait for her reply. "Come in, please." I enter the familiar scene. The room is decorated in the traditional style, less like an office and more like a sitting room. The desk is in the corner, tucked away as if it has no business disturbing the old-fashioned tranquillity here. In the centre a low table, usually hidden in a cupboard, is

arranged with a pair of zabuton, one on either side, for us to sit. A Go board is already on the table and Miss Yumi's desk has a tea set ready for the usual ritual.

Miss Yumi herself is sitting on one of the zabuton, looking up at me as I gently close the door behind me. She's never told me much about herself, especially not her age, but she's a small woman somewhere in her fifties, with grey hair in a tight bun, a violet blouse (apparently she likes the colour) and a long, pleated dark skirt. It's very different to my previous therapists, both men who (truth be told) slightly intimidated me. Not through their action, of course, but rather through the impression they each gave me during our meetings. When I started seeing Miss Yumi, I felt much happier, since the 'old grandmother' approach certainly put me more at ease. After she rejected my friendship last year I wondered for a while if she was simply putting on an act, but as I've grown more accustomed to our sessions I've come to realise that maybe Miss Yumi really is like that to everyone, and not just me.

Either way, I can't say I enjoy our sessions each week, but at the same time I don't dislike seeing her. At least the sessions help me in some small way.

As I walk across to the low table, Miss Yumi rises and joins me, bowing slightly just as I do. "May I have the honour of getting you some tea, Miss Hanako?" she asks, the same words every week. I reply as I always do.

"I h-humbly accept, Miss Yumi." She pours the tea and hands me a drinking bowl filled with sweet smelling liquid. As we sit, I sip gently from the bowl, savouring the taste, and place it to one side of the board, already prepared for our regular game. It's interesting that we play Go and not chess, but one of the very few things I've managed to find out about Miss Yumi during our sessions is that she happens to be something of an expert Go player. I get the feeling her reasons for not playing chess may have a little to do with skill, but more so something to do with my own feelings about the game. Nevertheless, it occasionally amuses me, the choice of our game, and indeed my usual pastime too. Black and white pieces fighting on a board in an endless struggle of wills. When really, as I've so often

discovered (sometimes to my cost), nothing is ever so clearly defined after all.

"Well then, Miss Hanako," she says, looking not at my scars, but into my eyes. "Shall we begin?"

"O-okay".

We have an unspoken rule. Only the person whose turn it is may speak. I play as white, meaning that Miss Yumi starts first. Unlike in chess, the white player in Go takes the second turn rather than the beginning move.

"So, how have things been recently? It's been a while since our last visit." She places her first stone near the centre of the board and waits patiently for my reply.

"I... um, I've been okay. H-how about you?" I ask from politeness more than actual curiosity. I know she won't tell me much, she never does. Miss Yumi is a therapist, after all, and a pretty poor one she'd make if she were to turn our sessions into discussions of her, rather than of me.

A brief pause as I carefully place my own first stone away from hers, in the top left corner quadrant. I don't expect to win, but just playing the game is enough. The amount of concentration I put in to playing, just like with chess, helps me take my mind off things.

"Things have been rather pleasant as of late. I trust you had a nice time last weekend?"

She's referring to the festival, of course. She makes her next move and I respond with just a hint of hesitation. "I... I didn't go. To the festival, I mean."

"Really? That's a shame. I feel like you would have enjoyed meeting new people there."

She isn't joking, though I wish she was. Ever since that day more than a year ago, Miss Yumi has done everything she can to encourage me, however subtly, to interact more with other people at Yamaku. She was more than a little pleased when I started hanging around with Lilly, and even more so when I told her about Akira and Yuuko too.

"I-I did see the fireworks... they were m-much better than last y-year..."

"Yes, I heard about the display last year. But where did you see them from, Miss Hanako?" Curiosity is clear in her voice, so I tell her.

"We w-went to the Shanghai... Me, Lilly and... someone else..." I don't know why I choose to refrain from mentioning Hisao by name. Possibly my nerves are simply too strong even here, in this calm setting with Miss Yumi opposite and the scent of tea drifting in the air.

She presses the subject though. "Someone else? My my, could it be then that you've found a new friend? I'm very pleased for you Miss Hanako, if indeed that's the case."

On her face is a smile, and looking at her I can tell it's genuine. Indeed, Miss Yumi appears to be positively beaming with delight at the prospect of me making a new friend. It's enough to inspire me to tell her a bit more.

"H-his name is Hisao N-Nakai... he just transferred to Yamaku a fortnight ago, and he... he came and spoke to m-me in the l-library... he seemed nice, so w-we invited him for t-tea, and he played chess w-with me during the festival..." I suddenly realise that I'm speaking more than I usually do in our meetings, and oddly enough I'm opening up to Miss Yumi a lot more than normal. It's my time now to place a stone, so I quickly shut up and take my turn. Already the board is looking to be in Miss Yumi's favour, her control steadily growing with each black stone that appears, but I've improved massively over time. She once told me to look for openings when playing defensively, and take advantage of opportunities as they arise. With Hisao, I'm certain I've done that.

"Miss Hanako, I can't tell you how happy I am to hear you've made a new friend. It's as I said before. I think that, with time, and with the support of good friends, you will be able to heal emotionally. This Hisao Nakai sounds like a kind and decent young man, and I'm sure he'll be a great help in your journey."

Hearing Miss Yumi's approval makes me feel glad. I was a little worried about what she may think of him, but now it seems there was nothing to be concerned about. Even so, I have a question for her, but it's one that I'm much too shy to ask. I can't even ask Lilly what her thoughts would be, for fear of the response and the attitude to my query. Not to mention, the reaction of Lilly feels the same way I do...

"Miss Yumi... I, um... D-did you ever feel like there was... something y-you wanted to know... something you wanted to ask, b-but you couldn't d-do it?"

I quickly make my move so as to free the conversation for Miss Yumi to reply. By now I'm not as invested in the game, nor in the moves I make, wanting only for the conversation to continue without me needing to say much at all.

"Of course, Miss Hanako. I should think everyone feels that way sometimes. Though I suspect this may have something to do with yourself, correct?" She places another stone and captures an impressively large space, my lack of attention to the game clear for all to see.

"Y-yes, Miss Yumi." I pause, uncertain of whether to continue. "T-the thing is... Did you ever have... feelings, t-that you... weren't sure about?"

I squirm a little in my seat, though I hope Miss Yumi didn't notice that. She gives no indication of whether or not she saw a thing, but as she ponders both her answer and her move I consider what would happen if I were to just get up and leave. I wouldn't do that out of respect and politeness, but it's not the first time I've had such thoughts.

"Hmmm... I think I can understand." This time, she stops without placing a stone. The etiquette we both abide by prevents me from saying anything, as

she thinks of something further to elaborate. "Miss Hanako, I know that we decided not to return to that... unpleasantness last year. I was pleased to see you making such good friends then, with Miss Satou and her sister. And Miss Yuuko too. But there is something I have to say that I said back then too."

I'm tempted to call out "What? What did you say then?" But the silence lingers as I refrain from abandoning the rules we have abided by for so very long. Eventually, Miss Yumi speaks again.

"I told you then that the second most valuable gift you could give anyone was your friendship. I never said what the most valuable thing was."

Another stone is placed and I can tell what she wants me to say. Her eyes are fixed on me, waiting for my response. "I... I d-don't know what you m-mean..."

Miss Yumi shakes her head at me, almost as if she's disappointed. That I would tell even such a tiny white lie. I know exactly what she means. I make my move quickly to avoid the demand to respond, and Miss Yumi sighs a little before continuing.

"I'm certain you know what I'm talking about, Miss Hanako. But I can't force you to admit it to yourself, nor to me. In any case, I'm truly happy for you. If you think so highly of this boy, Mister Nakai, then I can rest assured that not only is your progress continuing well, but that you really are allowing yourself to open up a bit more. That can only be a good thing."

I realise that there's more to tell. I know that I have to be more honest to Miss Yumi as well as to myself if I want these sessions to have any meaning, and to actually do some good. "I... um, I... told him. About m-my scars..."

Saying it now, it doesn't seem like such a big deal. But Miss Yumi knows how much it would have meant at the time, and how difficult it was for me to bare myself emotionally to Hisao, especially after just two weeks. It took much longer than that for me to tell Lilly, after all. Miss Yumi was spared,

since she had already seen my notes from the doctors. Even then, she still wanted to hear it from my own lips. It took two months before I was ready to say a word to her on the subject.

It's her turn now. My last move was hardly a great one, but there's no way I can concentrate on the game any more. "What was his reaction?" She places another piece and makes another capture.

"I... It was o-okay... he told me about h-his own..." I don't want to give away to Miss Yumi the exact reasons for Hisao being here, so I compromise a little. "He t-told me why he was at Yamaku." My words are deliberately vague, but thankfully she chooses not to press the subject. I didn't really expect her to anyway. My next stone goes down. It's already clear I've lost the game by now, just as I always do, but it hardly matters to me. Chess is more my thing, after all.

"So he accepted you just as you are. And more than that, he opened up to you in the same way that you did with him. A friendship like that is a rare gift indeed, Miss Hanako. All the more remarkable for the very short time you seem to have known him."

She pauses without making a move on the board. "It seems to me that you're nervous about showing your feelings, and that's something we've been struggling towards for the past year now. Not to mention Miss Satou's thoughts on the matter. Or, more likely perhaps, you aren't certain of your feelings yourself. Have you spoken to Miss Satou about any of this, Miss Hanako?"

She finally chooses a space to place another stone, and grants me the chance to speak. "N-not so much... I don't know how L-Lilly feels... I don't want t-to rock the boat..." I quickly make another move.

"If you don't say anything at all, then it doesn't help you in finding out how to proceed. Your choices, your feelings, matter a great deal, Miss Hanako. Never let anyone tell you otherwise. Still, I can't force you to talk to Miss Satou if you aren't yet sure of yourself. All I ask is that you think about this discussion, and perhaps try to show a little more courage in pursuing what

you want. Even if others are willing to allow you the freedom to do what you wish, you have to take advantage of the opportunity. I've said that before, yes?"

With her final move, Miss Yumi has easily beaten me yet again. Sometimes I think that if we were playing chess, the results would be very different. But with the restriction lifted on our speech, I can make my last comments before I leave.

"Y-yes, you have... Miss Yumi. I'll... think about it."

"Very well. I feel like we've made some large strides this past fortnight, even if I haven't seen you until now. We'll meet again same time next Sunday, yes?"

"Y-yes, Miss Yumi." We make our goodbyes, and I leave the room. As I walk back to the girls dormitory I start to take on board just what Miss Yumi was getting at near the end of our session. I doubt I'll be telling Lilly about my feelings, or rather, my potential feelings, anytime soon. It's not just the embarrassment, nor the fact that I barely know Hisao (and yet I feel like I can trust him after such a short time, just as Miss Yumi said). It's more the fear that Lilly may feel the same way. I know what I'm like, I know full well that if Lilly gave even the slightest hint of being interested in Hisao, I would never choose to pursue him. Assuming I had the courage to do so in the first place.

Something else that Miss Yumi and I didn't discuss, which will certainly be a topic of conversation in the next few sessions, is the fast approaching date that I always dread. Hisao has seen me at what passes for my best these past two weeks. He still has yet to see me at my worst. As I walk I try to keep my mind off the coming days, but I still continue to think about it despite my best efforts. I know that tonight, the nightmares will begin again.

12. Act 3, Chapter 1: King's Gambit Accepted

Act 3 – Chapter One: King's Gambit Accepted

It's been a few weeks now since I told Hisao about my scars. Every day brings us closer to the bad times, but even now I can't bring myself to tell him any more. I wonder sometimes if it's because I'm scared of his reaction, or because I'm still ashamed of feeling that way?

Miss Yumi is never much help around now. She tries, of course, and we discussed it during our last few sessions, but truth be told I'm surprised I've never had a breakdown during them. The nearer we get to that date, the harder it becomes for me, and the more closed off I become – as if it were possible for me to be more so. Anything that can take my mind off things will help now. There's still some time to go though, so I won't worry as much now as I will later. Until then, I'll seize anything to keep me occupied.

In a way, that's exactly what I'm doing now. Hisao and I have continued playing chess, with regular matches over lunch, but as the days have gone by and the troubles have edged nearer I've been losing myself more and more in the game. Miss Yumi noted last week, in fact, that I seem to be focusing more on our Go matches, and indeed I've been getting that bit better, though still nowhere near her level. At least Hisao is someone I can beat. "Mate."

"Again... what does that make this? 3-2?" Hisao sighs and knocks his king over in defeat. A common sight now, even if he has won the occasional game. Rare, but still...

"S-stalemates don't count." Which makes it one-nil to me.

"Damn. You're getting better at this every day." I don't think so. Really, I was always pretty good. Our first game though, I think that I might have just been glad to have someone new to play with, and as a result didn't focus as much on the moves I was making. Which meant making plenty of rookie mistakes and falling back on my old defensive play style. Miss Yumi told me during one of our Go games that I should look for opportunities

when playing defensively, and then take advantage of them. When I first played chess with Hisao, I regressed to the type of strategy I'd always relied on, missing those moments, and losing pretty badly. Now, I've returned to that more developed style, giving me more options and more ruses to use. Just one mistake from Hisao now is enough to turn the tide of the whole match, and I've gotten good at manipulating the board to create those opportunities. It's something I wish I could do away from the game, but I'm just not that type of person, I guess.

"Fancy another game?" Hisao asks, eagerness in his eyes. I wish I could, but I have some work to get done. It's not important and can definitely wait, but I know won't feel up to it later. If things are as bad as last year, locking myself in my room and skipping classes (and I'm certain they will be), then the more work I do now the better. Less to catch up on when I've recovered.

"I... I have to finish my homework..."

"Oh," he says, sighing a little. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow then."

I point at the teapot and cups on the table, still to be cleared away. "But... what about this..."

"Don't worry about that, I've got it."

"Oh... okay..." I'm kind of glad I don't have to clean up, but it would have been nice to spend just a moment more with Hisao. Well, I guess it can't be helped. I have no more excuses to stay. "S-see you."

"Later."

I leave as Hisao continues clearing up the mess. Almost as soon as the door closes I notice Lilly walking towards the tearoom, her cane tapping against the side of the wall and on the floor ahead of her. "Lilly?"

"Ah, Hanako, is that you? I was just on my way to find you and Hisao. I wondered if you would care to take a trip to the Shanghai with me?"

"Um..." I pause briefly. I need to get this work done, but visiting the Shanghai would be fun, not to mention another excuse to keep my mind off things. "I... I was going t-to get some work... finished..."

She realises my intentions straight away. "You want to be prepared?" Her voice is low, as if she doesn't want anyone else to hear. Lilly's the only person aside from Miss Yumi and the Nurse who knows the reason for my situation around this time. Not even Akira knows to the extent that Lilly does, and even then Lilly isn't aware of the full story. She edges around the topic, not wanting to cause any undue pressure, but with that simple comment she's already shown her awareness of my reasons for working so hard.

"I... um, I was... I wanted to..."

"It's alright, Hanako. I understand. I won't bring it up if you don't want me to."

"No, that's not... I just wanted t-to get it out of the way... if I miss classes again..." I've been pretty good recently, to be fair. Since opening up that time to Hisao, I've attended most of my lectures. Mutou-sensei has given his usual silent nod towards my leaving for each group project, but even then I've stayed, working alone, or more rarely with Hisao (provided he hasn't been snatched away by Shizune and Misha).

"That's fine, Hanako. It was just a suggestion, but if you feel like getting ready for later..."

"No! I-I want to... I can put it off j-just a l-little bit..."

"Are you quite sure?"

"I... I'm sure..." I'm not lying. The prospect of going to the Shanghai is more tempting than work. If I need to catch up later then so be it. Maybe I could use school work as makeshift therapy when I'm hiding away from the world, though somehow I doubt it will have any effect. As I consider this,

the door opens again and a familiar figure walks into the corridor. Lilly's head turns towards the sound.

"Ah, Hisao..." I say to him. It's a little bit of a surprise that he's finished cleaning up so quickly, but more so I'm a little worried he may have heard part of the conversation, despite the closed door. If he did, he makes no signs of understanding what Lilly and I were discussing.

"Oh my, Hisao is here as well?" Presumably she was expecting to have to search for him, or ask me where he might be. It's lucky for her then that Hisao was with me anyway.

"Afternoon, Lilly," he says. "What's up?"

"I was hoping," she replies, "now that I've finished with my class representative duties for the day, that I might have the two of you accompany me for tea at the Shanghai. It would be nice to enjoy ourselves outside of the school, for a change."

"I'd be up for it. I think Hanako had work to do, though...?" Hisao turns to me, as if to ask if I've changed my mind on the notes and exercises still to complete.

"I-it's... not all that much..." I say. It's interesting that I haven't stammered anywhere near as much since meeting Hisao, but as the dark days draw closer my speech is getting worse again.

"Wonderful. It seems that we're all decided then." Lilly clasps her hands together and, taking up her cane again, turns to leave, Hisao and I following in her wake.

Given the time of day, the road to town is almost deserted. I don't need to hide my face anywhere near as much as usual, though I still hold on close to Lilly. It's not too long before we reach the traditionally styled wooden doors of the Shanghai. We enter to see an almost deserted scene – just how I like

it. Lilly takes her arm back from mine for a brief moment to retract her cane, as Yuuko pops up from her usual hidey-hole.

"Welcome to the Shanghai! May I take your order?" She bows as always, even though she doesn't need to. Societal conventions aside, she knows us, and we're informal enough that the bow is unnecessary. Well, to everyone except Yuuko.

"Just tea, please," says Lilly. "Hanako, Hisao?"

"I'll have a slice of pie and some coffee," Hisao responds. That sounds nice, but I'm not exactly hungry, and I prefer tea to coffee anyway.

"Just... t-tea... please..."

"Coming right up. Please take any seat you wish, and I'll be back shortly." With that, Yuuko stumbles across to the counter, a smile and a nod accompanying her, as the three of us walk to the nearest window seats available. I don't hide away for once this time, instead choosing to ignore the world around me. Part of it is increased confidence, perhaps due to Hisao's influence? The other part is that keeping my mind off the days to come means I'm focusing that bit less on what the people around me think. The one good thing to come out of everything, I suppose.

As we sit down, Hisao looks across the table with concern. "Are you okay, Lilly? You look tired." She lowers her head with embarrassment written all over her face.

"Class representative work can be very tiring, considering that it often means dealing with the Student Council. Very tiring indeed."

It doesn't take a genius to work out that by "Student Council", what Lilly means is "her aggressive cousin and the loudest girl in Japan". I'm a little curious about the work though, I must admit. Particularly how other people deal with it. "How... do the other representatives go?" I say quietly.

"Better than I, but not by much. Shizune is a harsh taskmaster no matter whom she deals with." Sometimes I've wondered if the workload for Lilly is that bit higher, simply because of spite. Then again, it's not really hatred between Lilly and Shizune, more just a petty rivalry. Like a sibling thing, except between cousins instead. I wouldn't claim to know the details anyway, just that the pair aren't exactly best friends.

"It doesn't sound like you particularly relish the job," Hisao says. "Why do you do it in the first place, if it's that bad?"

"Being a class representative is enjoyable, and I can deal with the responsibility well enough. It's just that the people involved are sometimes..." She doesn't continue, but I can guess what Lilly was going to say next. Whatever it was, it would be slightly out of character for her. Not to mention the kind of thing you don't generally hear in public, especially a place as nice and quiet as the Shanghai.

With the break in conversation, I take the chance to leave for the restroom without causing a stir. I need it anyway, but I could also do with the time alone. I tend to stay out of Shizune discussions, regardless of my personal feelings on the matter. Thinking certain thoughts is one thing, but I'm not the kind of person to get actively involved in the dispute, even if it's nothing more than talking behind Shizune's back - I had enough of that happening to me after I got my scars.

My intended disappearance doesn't go unnoticed, however, as I rise from my seat. "Hanako?" calls Lilly, turning in my general direction. She must have heard the chair moving back, or felt me next to her as I stood up.

"I'll... be back in a bit." Avoiding any further questions, I leave and make my way to the restroom.

While I'm away from the others, I think about anything I can to keep my mind busy. I think about Shizune and the student council, about Mutou-sensei's lecture today, about the chess games, and even about more mundane things, like the mural on the wall near the dormitories. I was never one for art, but I still think it looks nice, if odd. When I finally return to the

table, I find that Yuuko has already been and gone, and waste no time in drinking my tea. We talk about mundane topics as we rest, the conversation turning from the student council to our respective reading choices – far more interesting in my view.

"Hey Hanako," Hisao asks. "I was just wondering... aside from chess and reading, do you have any hobbies or things you like doing?"

I pause, shocked at the question. What's brought this on? Why does Hisao want to know more about my interests? I steal a glance at Lilly, but she wears the same faint smile she had during our previous conversation. She's giving nothing away. Hesitantly, I reply.

"Um... I guess... I like singing a l-little. I'm okay with c-computers as well, but I... don't use them all that much." Next to me, Lilly nods. She already knows this much, and a little more too. I suppose I've always kind of liked jazz, however strange that may seem. I don't own any albums or go to listen to it, but I've occasionally borrowed CDs and a player from Akira or (on very rare occasions) used the computer in the library to listen. I don't say any of this to Hisao though, more out of nerves than a desire to withhold information. "W-what about... y-y..."

"Me?" I nod at Hisao's comment, confirming his thoughts. "There's chess," he says, "obviously, but also... hmm... there was soccer as well, though I can't really do that anymore. Reading, which I picked up in hospital... um..." It's starting to get a bit more awkward now. Maybe going down this path wasn't the best option after all. Lilly takes the opportunity to interject.

"It sounds as if you've picked up quite a few things since your accident." I retreat into myself again, as always, trying subconsciously to avoid dealing with the situation, whereas Lilly tackles it head on to regain control of the circumstances. Not for control's sake, but for mine. Even so, I guess she and Shizune are more alike than either would care to admit.

As she finishes, a soft melody comes from Lilly's pocket. "Sorry..." she says, answering her phone.

"I-it's okay..." She walks a short distance away so as not to disturb Hisao and I.

"Must be nice to be popular." I smile at Hisao's comment, but say nothing. I'd rather not talk right now. "It's nice and peaceful here," he continues, eyes closed in rest. "I wonder what it'd be like to have grown up somewhere like this, rather than in the city."

This slip of information is enough to pique my interest, despite my wishes to stay quiet. "Y-you come from the city?"

Hisao's eyes flicker open as he responds. "Yeah. You could say I was a city kid through and through."

"I-It sounds like a lot changed..."

"It did. I'm still not quite sure what to make of it all, though. It's a bit of a culture shock, in more ways than one. You must've gone through something like this when you first arrived at Yamaku, right? I'd imagine most new students would."

"N-not really..." I look away, a little unnerved. I'm not really sure how much to give away, how much to say to Hisao. It's true that I did feel something similar when I first came to Yamaku, but in a way I was also relieved. Finally, I would be among people whose situations were somewhat similar to my own. It wasn't long before I realised how naive I was being. Cliques and groups are as much a part of Yamaku as they are any other school. It didn't matter that there were other people here who had scars, or who had suffered through incidents like mine. They already had their friendships and groups that I wasn't a part of, and the formative years that I'd spent in the orphanage hadn't exactly helped my confidence or social skills. I ended up falling back to my old habits, just like when playing chess against Hisao that first time. It would be silly to say I'd improved over the past few years. Not by much, at any rate.

Before Hisao can probe any further, we overhear Lilly's conversation in the background. "But can't we deal with that on Monday? The fallout has

hardly settled from the last... I understand. I'll try to talk her down. You know what she's like when she gets locked onto an idea... Yes, thank you. I'll talk to you later, then. Goodbye."

She closes her phone and returns to us, but chooses not to sit down. Her face is positioned in our general direction, as if she can hear us breathing or something. I wonder what she was talking about, and who with, but before I can ask the question Hisao cuts in first.

"Need to go?"

"Unfortunately. Class representative work calls once again." That explains that, then.

"I-I can come with you." I've had fun, but being alone with Hisao would be a bit too much at the moment, after the conversation we sort-of just had.

"It's alright, Hanako. I'll just be going straight to the Student Council. There's no need to spoil a fine evening on my account. Besides, if you were to accompany me on my way back to the school, who would keep our poor Hisao company?"

As Lilly speaks I notice the hints of a very mischievous smile start to form on her lips. Her eyes are on me, even though she can't see me. She knows that I don't want to stay, and she's doing it anyway, damn her. I wonder how much she knows of my possible feelings in that regard? For Hisao, or not, either way she must know more than she's letting on. Otherwise, why have me stay here? I couldn't even go quietly with her, Lilly's hearing is too good, and she's not stupid. I give up.

"Okay..." My voice is timid as ever.

"I can join you for tea again later tonight, if you'd like. I may well need it." I agree to meet her later, passing Lilly her cane, and she leaves enough money (despite Hisao's protestations) to pay her share of the tea and meal, before saying her goodbyes to Yuuko and the pair of us. As she heads out the door, I glance at Hisao, acutely aware of the silence between us. This is

almost as bad as if he were asking more questions about my past. I want to open up to him, but the closer we get to that day, the harder it becomes.

"Want to order something else to keep us going?" he asks, filling the quiet. "We haven't had much of a dinner, after all." That's something I can definitely get behind, and I nod with enthusiasm. Hisao looks across to Yuuko, who takes the hint and hurries over.

"Would you like something else?"

"I'll just have a sandwich special and a hot chocolate," says Hisao. "Bit late for coffee by now. Hanako?"

"I-I'll... have the same..." I'm not massively hungry, but something to eat would still be good, and I'm not picky. Yuuko nods to us both and delivers another low bow, before turning on her heel and heading to the counter to prepare our order. Hisao and I sit in silence until she returns, bringing food and drink together with a smile. As Hisao begins to eat, I watch him, and start to fidget just a little.

"Not hungry?" I guess he noticed me. I shake my head to show him how wrong he is.

"I-it's not that."

"Aw," he replies. "I was all ready to have your share too." I can't help but let a tiny smile creep out, but my heart isn't in it. As I study his face, I notice that there's something a little... off.

"You looked... t-troubled. I-is something... w-wrong?"

Hisao pauses for a second or two. "We're friends, right?" His comment catches me off guard, but in a way he's right. I hope we are, at least...

"Friends..." I hesitate, and wonder what I should say, before deciding to just come right out and be honest. Well, not totally honest, at least about my feelings... "I-I think t-that we are..."

He seems rather relieved. "I see..."

I hope he's relieved, at any rate. His actions, his tone, and his posture, all suggest so, but the words don't match up. Why did Lilly have to leave? I don't know how to deal with this situation. "A-am I wrong? S-sorry, I-I..."

"No, it's just... hearing confirmation of that from you is reassuring." That's definitely a relief, at least for me, but he could have been a bit more direct. It would have been so much easier for me then! Hisao continues, "To pick up on what you said earlier: since coming to Yamaku, I've been a bit uneasy about how I should relate with others." He chuckles a little before picking up his mug. I can't tell him, but Hisao's feelings are nothing new to me. I guess he's figured that out already. Except in my case, it's more than just unease. It's not as if Hisao has to see a therapist like I do, after all.

My thoughts are disturbed suddenly, as a cry of pain comes from the boy opposite me. "Ouch! That's hot..."

I giggle a little, thinking that maybe I should have at least told him that. Oh well, no time like the present. "Th-that's why... That's why I haven't eaten yet. I-I was waiting... for my drink to cool down first." Fortunately Hisao doesn't seem to be annoyed at me for holding back the information. Not openly anyway.

"I guess I'll wait, then." He puts his mug back down and we both start to laugh, softly and quietly. It's a little bizarre, but there's not much else we can do really. I don't feel like talking, and I think Hisao has figured that out by now. We don't say anything else as we finally finish our little meal, pay Yuuko the bill, and start the journey back to Yamaku.

When we finally get back to the campus, and the space between the male and female dormitories, the day's events catch up and I let out a little yawn, one I try (and fail) to stifle in front of Hisao. "I'd better be off to my room, then," he says. "See you tomorrow, Hanako."

"G-good night..." We both turn and walk towards our respective buildings, as I realise that I probably won't be having that tea meeting with Lilly that

we agreed on. I'm not so sure she'll be back from her Council work anyway, if Shizune is involved again. Before I get too far away, though, I stop and turn back to face Hisao, watching as he leaves. Tonight was fun. It helped me keep my mind occupied, at least for a while, and although I wasn't exactly engaged in the conversation it was nice to learn a bit more about my new friend.

As I stop, Hisao also turns to look back at me, and I give a little wave, a rare and genuine smile upon my face. He smiles and waves back, before turning for the last time and walking away. I follow suit and begin the climb to my room, no doubt for the sole purpose of falling onto my bed and going straight to sleep. I'm scared, to be completely honest. I know tonight will be no different to every other night for the past few weeks, with nightmares and self-doubt racking my mind as I try to rest. What was a useful distraction earlier will have no effect when I'm asleep, and no matter what I do I can't focus on anything else again. I've been trying the relaxation techniques my therapist explained, and I've tried reading chess books before I sleep to give myself something else to think about, but it's no good at all. I reach my bed, undress and fall back onto the pillows. Morning takes a long time coming.

13. Act 3, Chapter 2: Queen's Side Castle

Act 3 – Chapter Two: Queen's Side Castle

As I enter Miss Yumi's office for our latest session, I can think of little else except how I don't want to be here.

As we make our first moves in our regular game of Go, I sit in near silence, answering only her usual questions about how I am, with a monotone voice and a clear message of unwillingness to chat.

I don't want to talk about all this. I wish I could just forget everything that happened to me when I was young, all the reasons for me being in this room right now. Hell, even the reasons for me coming to Yamaku in the first place. I want to turn the clock back and return to a time long before I met Lilly and Akira and Miss Yumi, before Yuuko and Hisao were ever aware of my existence. A time when I had a family, when I had people who loved me unconditionally for who I was, not for what damage had been done and how it had changed me so much. I just want to forget my past, my present, and change it all.

I'm startled from my reverie by Miss Yumi's voice, soft but stern, and I realise she isn't exactly happy about my current mood.

"Miss Hanako," she says, holding a black stone in one hand while resting her head in the other. "I understand that our recent meetings have been... less than fruitful. I know that things are hard. But you must realise, I can't help you if you are unwilling to even talk to me and let me do what I can for you." She places her piece and allows me to reply.

"I... I understand... Miss Yumi." I do. I really do. But she doesn't seem to realise herself that I don't want her help. She can't help me. Nobody can. I quickly place a white stone to avoid speaking to her.

"Miss Hanako, I want to be clear here. Our meetings each week are scheduled so that we can attempt to work towards some resolution in terms of the emotional trauma you have suffered. I want to help you. But Yamaku

admitted you as a student on the basis that you would at least make some effort to respond to these sessions, and try your best to improve. This isn't for our benefit, but yours. In the past year we have made good progress, and recently things seemed to be getting much better. Now we're moving backwards again. We can continue these meetings as we have done for the past few weeks, without any effort on your part, or we can simply wait until after these times have passed and begin afresh. It's your choice, and I will support you no matter what, but you have to make your decision now."

That's the most I've ever heard Miss Yumi say in one go, and in a way it startles me. I know she has my best interests at heart, and I feel guilty for doing this to her, but everything she has done for me makes no difference around this time. Last year I refused to even attend our sessions, and afterwards was called in to a meeting with a representative from the Yamaku Foundation to discuss my absences. Miss Yumi managed to persuade them to give me another chance, but I knew then that I couldn't afford to do the same thing this year. Otherwise I'd be in my room now, reading, trying my hardest to think about anything but the looming date.

I can see two sides to what she is saying, but it seems to me that neither answer will be good enough. If we continue as we have done, it will only serve to frustrate Miss Yumi more, though she would never show it, save for a soft sigh here and there. Much like Lilly. If I abandon my therapy until afterwards, it will do nobody any good, and I run the risk of further meetings with the Foundation. Meetings where I'll no longer be able to rely on the good grace and support of Miss Yumi. She'll help, of course, but there's less chance that the Foundation will listen this time. In a way, she's trapped me in taking a third option. I have no choice but to treat these sessions like any other, and try to allow Miss Yumi to help me. I know she won't be able to, past experience tells me as much. But I don't have any further say in the matter.

"I... I want t-to stay. I'll do w-what I c-can..." Another piece is placed on the board.

"I'm glad to hear that, Miss Hanako, but you have to work with me. I don't wish to be hard on you, and without your support there's little I can do for you." More spaces captured. I've already lost the game, just as I've lost the argument, long before it's even begun.

"I... I understand."

"Good. Now that we're on the same page once more, we can move on. I'm very curious to hear more about your friendship with Mister Hisao Nakai. How is that faring these days, I wonder?"

She brushes the previous subject under the carpet so easily, but I know she'll come back to the topic later. When we finish our game, which seems to be coming very soon judging by the current state of play, the restriction of the rule on speech will be lifted, and we'll both be able to talk without having to wait for our turn in the match. I know that for these difficult conversations, Miss Yumi prefers to be free to speak when she needs to, and I always allow her to. It's easier for me as well, that way.

"They... they're well. I t-think he's b-busy t-today... though..."

I'm unwilling to give more information, and Miss Yumi seems willing to drop the matter. At least I'm answering her questions now, which would appear to have been her main concern. Lilly said something similar actually, earlier, when I saw her in the corridor in the dormitories. She did also mention that she was going to see Akira in town, but when I asked for more details she was unusually hesitant. I'm still curious now, but it's not worth thinking about. I hope not, at any rate.

"That's good to hear, Miss Hanako. Did you ever speak to Lilly about the subject you mentioned to me?"

"N-not much..." I did bring the topic up once, briefly, but I was too shy to say any more. From what I can tell, Lilly doesn't feel that way about Hisao, but even so I'm loath to do anything about my own potential feelings. Not that I could anyway. Really, her answer would have changed nothing, save making me feel a little more or a little less guilty.

"I see." Miss Yumi pauses for a moment, before continuing to speak. She knows that even now I don't want to stick around, but I stay put in my seat regardless. "Miss Hanako, I want you to remember, whatever happens, to hold on to those feelings. Whether they're there or not, the idea of friendship, or indeed anything more, will be an anchor for you. You need to remember that there are people who care for you, who love you without cost, who will always be there to help you when you need it. I hope you realise that."

"I... I do, Miss Y-Yumi." I know what she means. That's half the problem. They're always there and won't allow me to spread my own wings, no matter how small the wingspan may be. I don't need a saviour. I need true friendship. Maybe with Hisao I'll have that now, but I can't be certain, and it's too late for this year to find out if he could be that person.

My final stone is placed. This game has gone remarkably quickly, but then again I made a lot of silly errors in my first moves, and gave Miss Yumi a massive advantage (not that she needed one) from the very beginning. It was no surprise for her swift victory to arrive so suddenly. In a way, I'm relieved. We can talk freely, and if I want to leave I have no further guilt now in doing so.

"Miss Hanako..." I knew she's come back to this subject. "You told me a few weeks ago that you were having nightmares. How are they now?"

They're much the same, and I tell her so. I don't give any details, she heard those when I first described them to her, when I wasn't quite as bad as now. I remember my parents sitting on wooden chairs in our lounge, watching television, while I, six years old once more, rest on the floor playing with some kind of plastic blocks. In my nightmares, I look up and everything is well, but then the smell of burning plastic hits me, and I look down to see the blocks in flames, melting in my hands. As I drop them, I look up to see my parents engulfed, everything around us burning. Within seconds they're replaced by nothing but bones and ash, before I let out a piercing scream. I wake up every night in the same way, but no sound comes from my lips. I'm sweating and shaking but can't call for help, my mouth as dry as the air

around me as I watch my parents burn. I told Miss Yumi three weeks ago, and I've never told anyone else. Even Lilly doesn't know. I can hear the concern in her voice each morning, but she's never heard me screaming as I wake, never heard my quiet sobs in the dark. I'm helpless.

I'm helpless.

Miss Yumi starts to speak again. "I can provide medication to help you sleep, for the time being, but I'd rather not do so if given a choice. I don't like the idea of drugging you simply to help you get some rest each night. It's up to you, Miss Hanako. If you feel it would be better for you then I'll ask Nurse to make the arrangements."

"That... that won't b-be necessary... t-thank you, though..." I don't want to be doped up in order to sleep each night. If these nightmares are to be my punishment, for surviving while my family died in front of me, then I'll suffer them without complaint.

"Then it's your choice. I would make a suggestion, though."

"Y-yes, Miss Y-Yumi?" What does she mean?

"In order to get through this time, you need to try and replace your old memories with new ones. Happy ones. Maybe then you'll be able to face these days without fear, and without the emotional stress that you have so far been facing."

"What d-do you m-mean?"

Miss Yumi pauses again for the smallest of moments, before replying to my query. "I'd like you to make an effort to become friendlier with the people around you. You've already opened yourself up to Mr Nakai, and things seem to be progressing well with him. Perhaps the time is ripe for you to allow others to get close to you also. In doing so, you'll have more opportunities to move on from your current emotional state, and forge new lasting friendships. Remember, it's the second most important gift, after all."

I don't know that I'll be able to easily do what Miss Yumi is requesting, but perhaps she has a point. If I can make a new friend in Hisao then maybe I can make new friends among my other fellow students. I'm scared, though, that I won't be able to. I worry that I'll shut down again as soon as anyone even tries to speak to me. Perhaps with Shizune or Misha there's a chance, since I already know them a little through Lilly, and since they're friends of Hisao it might be easier for me to handle being with them. Then again, their attitudes and Misha's loudness may be a problem...

I don't know if I can do it, but it's worth a try. I have to be stronger, for my sake and for Miss Yumi too. She has confidence in me, despite our past few breakdowns in therapy. I know that I mustn't betray her and that the effort will be tough, but manageable. Still, as I give her my goodbyes and leave her office, I know that it will be extremely hard to go against everything I've spent doing at Yamaku so far. I realise how difficult making a new friend will be, whoever I try to open up to. Where would I even start?

Perhaps I could try to join a work group during class tomorrow, ideally whoever Hisao works with. It's the only chance I'll have, as I know I won't seek one out myself. Walking back to my bedroom though, my confidence fails me, and I break down silently. The memories of my past come flooding back and the images of my recurring nightmare rush into my mind without hesitation. I spend my afternoon in bed, crying myself to sleep.

I wish the morning would come soon. I wish everything was different.

Darkness falls. The nightmare comes again.

14. Act 3, Chapter 3: Fracture

Act 3 – Chapter Three: Fracture

Turning up to classes is a massive work of effort now. If I had my way I'd simply lie in bed and stare at the walls until this passes. However, I owe it to Miss Yumi to at least try. Besides, I can see Hisao getting worried after my good behaviour recently, and the last thing I need is him knocking on the door (with or without Lilly's support) trying to drag me away. Even if he felt it was the best thing for me.

So, here I am. Nevertheless, I'm barely listening to the lecture. Something about chemistry, I think. I've probably read it somewhere already. I glance briefly at Hisao but his eyes are fixed on the window, the sun shining outside and beckoning us all to escape the dull room I feel increasingly trapped in. As I look away I'm startled by my name, of all things.

"Now... Ikezawa?"

Mutou-sensei stares at me, not at my scars, but directly into my eyes. Did he sense that I wasn't paying attention? No, he's not so harsh. It was just my turn to answer something for once. It's extremely rare, though, given my situation. I stare back, trying to avoid eye contact with anyone but the teacher. "Y-yes?"

He clears his throat and asks the question. "In this particular example of a redox reaction, the combustion of methane reaction actually produces one more product than is listed. That product is...?"

I quickly scan the board to see what is listed, and where the gaps are. I definitely read about this just last week, while trying to prepare for my eventual withdrawal. It still takes a moment, though, for the right answer to arrive in my head. I bite my lip as I try to come up with the words to say...

"Um... h-heat?"

A few seconds pass in silence. I worry that I've made a fool of myself in front of the rest of the class. Then... "Well done. This is an exothermic reaction, with the reaction giving more heat than is put into it." Mutou nods briefly and turns away, continuing his lecture, as I gratefully sink into my seat and sigh. I managed to get through without too much trouble. My exterior betrays nothing, and nobody can tell the trauma still hidden inside. I steal another look at Hisao and notice he's smiling, just a little. It's a start.

"Right then. For the remainder of this class I'd like you to work in groups of three or four on the problems in chapter twelve. I'll be here if you need me." With Mutou's instructions comes a nod in my direction, his silent approval for me to take my leave and retreat to the library. As he sits down he takes some paperwork from his desk and starts to write. I hear a familiar voice to one side, Hisao being accosted as usual by a pink piece of construction equipment and her silent handler.

"I suppose we have a group, then", he says.

"Hicchan!" comes the reply. "You want to work together? Okay, okay! That's great, it's really been a while!" As if he had a choice. It looks to me like they're standing on either side of his desk, surrounding him, not the other way around. The noise of people moving tables and shuffling their chairs is almost deafening, an irony I doubt is lost on our esteemed president.

Can I do this? Really? I think back to my last session with Miss Yumi. It's not too late for me to leave, to slip away silently and head to my favourite beanbag. Or even further afield. Nobody would blame me, if anyone were even to notice with my exit being masked by the racket around me. Still, Miss Yumi's words come back to me. She wanted me to at least try and do something with other people. Working as part of a group would be perfect, especially if I'm working with Hisao. At least then there'd be somebody I know and could even possibly trust without any problems. Shizune can't do much either, relying on Misha to act as her 'voice'. And there's the problem. How would I be able to deal with someone as loud and boisterous as Misha?

It's a difficult decision. As the sound dies down I realise that I have little time left to make a move. What would Miss Yumi say, as if I don't already know? Or Lilly, for that matter? They'd both be gently, ever so slightly, pushing me to join in, without it being too obvious or forceful. It wouldn't be too hard for them to suggest what I should do, but never try to control my choices or push me too hard to do something I don't want to do.

I know I'll regret this if I don't join in. Damned if I do, damned if I don't.

I move slowly forward and stand uneasily just behind Shizune, wondering if I should make my presence known, when Hisao catches my eye. As he does, Misha turns (presumably curious to what he's looking at) and faces me. "Good afternoon, Hanako!"

"Um... hello..." I return the greeting quietly, eyes fixed on Misha's hands as she relays the words to Shizune. In turn, the president looks across at me, before tapping Misha's shoulder to get her attention. I find myself unable to follow the rapid signing that follows, even if I could read the language (which I can't).

"Shicchan says, if you're looking for a group, you can join ours!" I'm a little surprised, truth be told. I expected questions, with Shizune wanting to know why I chose to stay behind this time. The lack of an interrogation is far from unwelcome, in any case. I look down and blush, ever so slightly. At least I'm with people I know, even if it's a tenuous relationship at best in two of the three cases.

I turn away to bring my desk across, the sound of metal dragging on the floor grating in my ears. Behind me I hear Misha in her quietest voice, which isn't actually that quiet. "I guess we get to play again, Hicchan! You hardly ever play with us anymore..." From the choice of words I guess it's Shizune who was really saying that. Misha is playful, sure, but I've never had much indication she's the type to flirt with anyone, and especially not Hisao. As for Shizune, well, I know from past experience and from Lilly's comments how competitive she gets. All this would just be another game to her.

As I think I almost miss Hisao's response... "I wonder why? You two always seem to have some ulterior motive." My thoughts exactly.

"That hurt, Hicchan..." Shizune again, I would assume. As close to direct a response as she can manage to the challenge posed by Hisao. "I'd almost think you were insulting me! But! It's Hicchan, so I know that you're joking!"

I'm facing the trio now as I move my desk a bit closer, struggling to navigate the narrow corridors left by the haphazard arrangement elsewhere in the classroom. I can see Misha smiling like the Cheshire Cat, while Shizune's face is marred by an exasperated frown. I suppose the last sentence was Misha's little edit.

"Such a great sense of humour about it; it'd be awful if someone were to take advantage of your good nature." Hisao goes on the offensive. "Like making you help them with their work."

As he finishes speaking, Shizune's look changes from a frown to a triumphant smirk, as if she's suddenly realised that her foe has forced himself into checkmate. "Wahaha," her translator cries. Before anything further can be said, Shizune meets my eye and maintains a more neutral expression. I guess now I'm ready to start working, the games are over.

As I sit down my face drops and I look straight at the floor. I've already noticed something nobody else has, something that the previous conversation was enough to distract me from, however briefly. Now that the silence has hit, the curious looks of those around me are enough to push me deeper into my reverie. Nobody gives a damn when I leave the classroom, but it's so strange for me to stick around. Everyone feels the need to stare, and it makes me feel awful.

I do my best to ignore it, but still the eyes are on me for a few minutes longer. Hisao meets my gaze for the shortest second before I look away, but I see the concern spread across his features. At least he cares. Misha and Shizune make an effort to avoid paying any attention to what's going on, and for that I'm grateful. They're acting as if nothing's wrong and in a way

it's comforting. It makes me feel just a tiny bit more at ease, no simple task here, but it will take a lot more than that to put me fully at rest. Even so, the gesture is nice.

Eventually the rest of the class settles down to work. "Hi, Hanako," comes a bright voice from my side. "It's nice to finally work with you."

I appreciate Misha's comment, especially since I know it's from her (no sign from Shizune, in the literal sense of the term), but my mind is still on the events of a moment ago. "Y-yeah." Across from me, Shizune finally starts to sign, as Misha quickly translates.

"Are you the reason Hicchan has been avoiding us lately? Shicchan says it's a little rude, but if Hicchan wanted to spend time with a cute girl, it's understandable!"

I'm a little embarrassed at that. Well, more than a little. I act on reflex, moving my hand to cover the right side of my face, but nobody else seems to notice. Of interest to me is the wording used just now, though. I realise that Misha was adding her own comment to the message conveyed by Shizune, but I doubt someone like Shizune would say I was 'cute'. Then again, I wouldn't expect anyone to say something like that. So that must have been Misha's addition. Why would she say that? In my nervousness I can't help but return to my old stammer.

"I-I don't t-think it's like that..." I start to fidget, my hands unable to stay still. I uncover my face and pick at my palms, my fingers twitching, unable to cope with the attention. I do like Misha, but right now I wish she'd simply shut up.

"Really?" she continues. "So! He wasn't hanging out with you yesterday?"

What is she talking about? Nobody was hanging out with me yesterday. I was either with Miss Yumi or alone... "N... no..." I sneak a look at Hisao, who's starting to look a lot more uncomfortable. What is he trying to hide? Do I really want to know?

"Yeah," he says, "I was... doing something else. You know how it is..." Looking at him, he clearly doesn't want to discuss this any more than I do. Can we not just start working already? It doesn't work out that way, however, as Shizune starts signing further questions. Perhaps I was quick to dismiss the probability of an 'interrogation' earlier after all.

"Really? I wonder what was so important, for Hicchan to blow us off like that! If it wasn't to spend time with Hanako, then what could it be? It's really interesting..."

No, it isn't interesting, Misha. Please, just stop. I know she doesn't mean to cause any trouble, but she seems to have such difficulty in picking up on how awkward this is for us all. Nevertheless, I'm starting to get more and more worried about what Hisao was doing yesterday. I know I spoke to Lilly, albeit only very briefly, when I had a chance (reluctantly, on Miss Yumi's advice), about the possibility of her having feelings for Hisao. Maybe I was too vague in my clumsy questioning to get a clear answer...

"W... were you with L-Lilly?" I can't help myself, and in the corner of my eye I see a brief flash of amusement cross Misha's face. The glimmer of defeat betrays Hisao's next comment.

"W-what makes you say that?"

I've had a stammer long enough to recognise Hisao's stumble there, even if the guarded tone of his voice wasn't a clue. I know I'm right. "Y-yesterday Lilly said something s-similar..." Which is true. She was much better at hiding her intentions than Hisao, too. She's a much better liar, though I'm not sure if that's a good thing, or bad.

While I try to locate the falsehood in Hisao's words, Misha jumps back in to the conversation, spurred on by more signs from Shizune. I can't help but wonder which of them is enjoying this more, and it makes me feel sick.

"Suspicious! Hicchan! I demand that you explain yourself!"

"Hey, shouldn't we be doing the assignment?" I kind of agree with Hisao here, but I still want to know more. I realise I'm torturing myself by doing

so, but the lack of knowledge seems so much worse than the truth.

"But! It's so mysterious... even Hanako wants to know!" It's clear all over my face, and Misha can see that, but inside I'm tearing myself apart with indecision. Either answer would be better than this, but I'm dreading hearing it.

"Alright. I'll tell you. I went into town with Lilly, but it wasn't what you think." Alright then. This is it. Moment of truth. "Lilly and I were," he continues. "Uh... for Hanako's birthday... we were..."

No.

No. I don't want to believe it. What did she say to him? What did she tell him?

All I can sense is silence. Hisao knows there's something wrong, but he doesn't say a word. Misha and Shizune both know about my troubles, they heard from Lilly long ago, but they don't understand how bad it can get. As soon as I heard that word, it acted like a trigger. Hisao and Lilly being alone in the city together only makes it worse. My mind races through the worst possibilities I can think of, as Shizune and Misha exchange sheepish looks. I stare at my desk, my face frozen. I barely hear the next words from Misha, much quieter than her usual manner of speech.

"Hanako? I'm sorry..."

Does she even know what she's apologising for? Is she saying sorry for thinking Lilly and Hisao were doing something else together? Is she sorry for what they really were up to? Or is she sorry for the way she kept pushing and pushing and pushing...

I wait a few seconds, but each one lasts a lifetime for me.

Eventually I raise my head. "I-it's... okay..." I can barely speak. I look at the paper in front of me but nothing sinks in. I can't focus. My mind is full of nothing but bad thoughts, flashbacks to my distant past. My hands are

numb, unmoving, while I can't hear a word anybody says to me or anyone else. I'm dimly aware that Misha is trying again to speak, but the context flies overhead and my brain refuses to register a single damn thing. I reply on nothing but impulse, my mouth acting on autopilot. "I-I... um.. n-not really... I g-guess..." The simple reply gives my body a chance to breathe out, the only other sign I make of any kind of human reaction.

"You okay?" Hisao's voice goes straight through me like a knife. "I could go over this bit if you want."

He doesn't understand. None of them understand. Not a single one. I shake my head again, the tiniest of movements. I don't need to know this, I don't want to work on the damn problems, I just want to be alone and I don't need any of this hassle, I don't need the constant looks of pity and the staring at my scars and the oblivious glances, I just want sweet blessed oblivion itself, anything to keep me away from all this... this...

Still. That's all I am. Nothing more. Completely still. Like the grave.

"Hanako?" Misha sounds like a high-pitched cannon going off in my head, such a contrast to the blissful silence of a mere moment ago. "Are you sure you're okay?"

No, Misha. I'm not okay. "Y-yes..."

"Are you sure?" No, Hisao, I'm not sure. "I'm fine." I turn my head away in a vain attempt to reinforce my statement, my rare defiance. I stay silent as the others discuss the group problems. I have enough problems of my own.

Beside me I feel the subtle vibrations in the air as Shizune's arms wave. I feel everything around me so much more keenly now. On cue, the translation comes. "Hanako, you're being too quiet. You have to contribute too! Someday, we might work on a bigger project, like one that's so big it's worth celebrating afterwards, like with ice cream, or cake. If you act like this, we won't take you along!"

I don't want cake. I don't want ice cream.

I want my family.

"Guys," my white knight says, "don't tease her like that." I feel so damn helpless. I feel sick at myself, at Hisao, at Lilly, even Miss Yumi. I want this to be over. I want it all to end.

"Hicchhan, it's all in good fun! Shicchhan says she teases everyone, anyway." I don't care. No wonder Lilly doesn't get along with her.

Don't they understand I'm not like everyone else? Do they just not care? And after all this time, those tiny movements aside, I haven't even twitched.

"Hey, the clock is kind of ticking down. We should speed up a little."

How long have I been like this? How long have I lost myself in my thoughts of despair and self-loathing? A second drags on forever and minutes lose all meaning.

"Hicchhan! You sound a little like Shicchhan, there..."

"Just because I looked at my watch? Jeez, is that really all it takes? Time management, and suddenly I'm the Student Council president?"

I want to laugh along with them but I know it will never happen. I'm not like them. I don't know how to act around people, I don't know what it's like to have friends or family or to be normal. Everything around me is conspiring to make my whole life nothing but a living hell and I'm sick and tired of feeling this way but there's nothing I can do as the clock ticks down and seconds pass like lifetimes and I feel the stares and everyone is looking at me even Hisao and Misha and Shizune and I just feel my life is worthless I should have died too I shouldn't be here I shouldn't be here I shouldn't be here...

Misha keeps asking what's wrong and there's nothing I can say, I literally cannot say anything to her and I wish she would just shut the hell up and leave me alone. Outside I'm frozen but on the inside I'm screaming,

windows shattering in my own psyche and breaking every single bond I was ever foolish enough to construct...

"Did.. we upset her?" My eyes are closed and yet I still hear Misha speak, I still feel the motion in the air that suggests someone walking towards us. Mutou-sensei is the only choice, nobody else would even care enough to make the effort to do anything but stare. His voice confirms it.

"Don't worry." He looks straight at me, but unlike everyone else, he looks into my eyes.

He's the only one who cares enough to try.

"Hi, Ikezawa. Can I help you at all?" I don't say a word. His hand rests gently on my shoulder and I tremble like a leaf in the breeze. He stands back. "Is that it? Nothing's wrong, then?"

I feel the stares subside. I'm grateful.

"I think," Mutou continues quietly, "for Ikezawa's sake, that it would be good to quickly take her somewhere away from others. Nakai, Hakamichi, could you please take Ikezawa out of the classroom? I'll keep everyone settled, so please don't worry about anything but her, okay?"

I feel them take my arms and pick me up, though my legs are just barely strong enough to walk, in a fashion. Whatever control I still have over my feelings are spent on Mutou-sensei for his help, for keeping Misha away as I'm taken somewhere else.

It doesn't matter though.

Nothing else matters. When I start to gain some semblance of life again I find myself in the corridor with Hisao and Shizune. I say nothing. Nothing matters now.

"Are you okay with me taking you to the Nurse's office?" Shizune is gone. I'm dimly aware of that, at least. I stay quiet but stand and follow Hisao as

he walks. We reach the office without incident. The corridors are empty and I can barely say a word. The moment we get there, I'm shown to a bed. My eyes stay open as I fail to sleep.

15. Act 3, Chapter 4: Flanking

Act 3 – Chapter Four: Flanking

I don't feel any better when I return to my room. As soon as I arrived at the infirmary a message was sent to Miss Yumi, and she arrived not long after Hisao left. Maybe they even passed each other in the corridor, I don't know. Two worlds colliding? In any case, she sat with me for a few hours, gently coaxing me out of my catatonic state while the Nurse watched. She even brought a Go set along, though by the time I felt fit enough to play we had nothing to say to each other. I don't want to talk about this morning.

Now I'm lying on my side in my room, all alone. The door is unlocked but I don't have the strength to get up and lock it. My eyes are closed so tight not a single teardrop can escape. I just want to be left here by myself, but blessed solitude is a hard won gift here.

"Hello, Hanako." Lilly's voice rings through my ears, while next to her I can just about hear someone else putting something down. I can guess who it is, and Lilly's next words confirm it. "Hisao told me about what happened today... are you alright?"

I should think the answer would be obvious, but I can't bring myself to say it to her. My eyes open just a little as I reply. "I... I'm okay..." As I turn my head slightly I see the frown on Hisao's face, quickly masked by a deliberately neutral expression. Can he not bear letting me see his concern? I can't understand why. It's not as if I'm any good to him, nor Lilly. Not worth worrying about. "S-sorry... f-for making you w-worry." R-really... I'm f-fine now..."

I close my eyes again and listen to Hisao's response. "I said it before, right? You don't need to be sorry for this." There wasn't a need for this in the first place. No need for you to bother with helping me.

"Hisao's right. We... I... shouldn't have hidden something like a birthday celebration from you." Please don't say it. I shiver a touch and shy away from the words. There's no point, Lilly.

She crouches and brings her head closer to mine. "I'm the one who should be sorry, Hanako." No. Don't say that, don't you dare. Why even waste your time with me?

I stare at her, the way I hate others doing so to me. The irony isn't lost on me but right now I don't care. I can't help but be amazed that after all this they still care about me. They're fools for doing so, but at least I have someone here now. It won't help me but at least I have someone to miss me. I find the strength to pull myself up and twist my body around, bringing myself slowly into a sitting position.

Next to me, Lilly feels the movement on my mattress and sits down, taking my left hand in hers as she sits on my right.

"Lilly," Hisao says, "if you want me to go..."

I don't. For once I have people here for me. I still feel conflicted but between not deserving help right now and still wanting it, I don't want Hisao to leave. "I don't... want that..." I manage to say. I glance up briefly to see their reactions, and am met with faces filled with surprise. Hisao mumbles "Okay..." and sits at the desk.

I look back at Lilly, her blank eyes resting on me, as close to seeing me as she can get, and I know something is wrong. Why else would they be here, making so much effort to comfort me? All I want is to be alone, and yet I wanted Hisao here. Why? It makes no sense even to me. My thoughts are disjointed, my feelings all over the place but always converging on a single point. My loss, and my tragedy.

My fears are confirmed when Lilly next speaks. "Hanako, I'm afraid I have some bad news." She pauses and my face falls. "My aunt has fallen ill, so I need to return to my family for a time."

She's leaving? "Your... family... You mean in Scotland, right?" She has to go to Scotland? She won't be here... I'll have no-one but Hisao. Which is about as useful as having them both, really. I'd only be pushing them both away again for the next few weeks anyway.

"That's right. Akira and I will be leaving Saturday."

"S-so you're going away?" I don't want her to leave, and yet it's better for me if she does. She won't be knocking on my door each day filled with useless worry that I'm not worthy of. My mind is torn and I can't say or do a single thing to show it.

"I won't be gone for long. Probably only a week or two. I'll be back before you know it, and Hisao will be here, right?" I don't want him here, that's the problem. He's wasting his time on me and I'm a fool for thinking anything could come of it. I'm not worth his time in the first place.

"That's right, I'm not going anywhere." Such a fool...

"I-is your aunt going to be alright?" No reason I can't show concern for others, people who should probably get it more than me.

"I'm not sure," comes Lilly's response. I can't help but feel just a tiny bit better for the distraction in my mind, something else for me to hold onto as a barrier against the demons in the dark. It only makes me feel more guilty, though, but in a different way. We all stay silent for a few moments, before the quiet is broken by Hisao.

"Anyway, we were thinking that it would be a good idea to have a going-away party for Lilly, and it could double as... yeah..."

Don't say it. Don't send me back into that state. Don't break me yet again, please, Hisao. After all you've done for me, no matter how stupidly, I don't want you to be so cruel.

I'm saved as he cuts himself off. Not a mention made, but we all know what he means. Lilly replies as she squeezes my hand ever so gently. "Is it alright by you, Hanako? It won't be anything lavish or overdone, just something small in my room."

If it's so small, I might be able to do something. I might just be able to manage it. "S-so just in the school? Just us?"

"That's right," she confirms, "just the three of us. If you like, I could ask Akira to come as well."

"O...kay. Y-you're only going for a week?" Akira might help, if this proves a distraction as I hope it does.

"One week or two, yes. I promise you it won't be any longer."

"O-okay..." So she won't be here for my actual... Will she tell Hisao what to expect? The best thing he can do, for himself and for me, will be to leave me alone then. To not even try being there for me. There's no point. There's no point...

"All right then," he cuts in. "You look like you need a rest, Hanako, so it might be best if we all went back to our rooms for now."

That might be best, yes. With this visit my mind is as exhausted as my body and I just want to sleep. Maybe I'll be lucky and the nightmares won't come. I still don't see why they're wasting their time with me, but I'm not ungrateful for it. "You know that if you ever want anything, you can always talk to me or Hisao, right?" If I deserve it, Lilly, then yes, I know. It's a big if, though.

"I... understand. Thank you Lilly, Hisao."

"Well then, good night, Hanako." She gets up from the bed and starts to walk towards the door, Hisao following close behind.

"Night..." They close the door behind them and my head flops down onto the pillow once more. I can hear muffled voices from the corridor outside, but I have no interest in eavesdropping. I just want to sleep. My eyes close again, but this time there are no more tears to fall. No tears to guard against. Despite my hopes, the nightmares come again.

16. Act 3, Chapter 5: White Knight Sacrifice

Act 3 – Chapter Five: White Knight Sacrifice

I avoid lessons the next day. I don't feel up to it, I don't want to go down there and face the stares and the judgement from everyone, people harassing me and asking what happened yesterday. Not to mention I was advised to stay in by Miss Yumi. Normally she tries to get me out there, talking to people, making some effort to get past my issues, but she's nothing if not tactful. I wonder why she even tries to help me? It's just a job for her, surely? Again I find myself torn in two. On the one hand, I don't feel like anybody should bother trying to help me, as if I actually deserve the sympathy or the aid. On the other hand, I want to be helped. I want people to be there for me. When the times are less hard, when everything is calm then I can find some balance, and I can feel as if, for once, I do deserve the support given by those few who care. It's all I want. When we move closer to the tough times, though, and breakdowns like this become commonplace, I find it so much more difficult to cope and find the common ground. My despair triumphs over my hope, and all that's left is darkness.

A void in my heart and screaming in my head.

I find myself sleeping in, unable to wake from the noise in my mind. My own voice muffled by the confines of my brain, no physical thing, but a purely mental torture. When I do finally wake up, I stare at the ceiling. After a while, I take a shower, taking advantage of the fact that everyone is in lessons, but when I return to my room wearing my dressing gown I return immediately to bed. No food in my stomach, nor water, my body fights against me but I can barely force myself out of bed to find something to eat or drink. I'm given no motivation to do so, until I hear a faint knocking on the very edge of hearing.

A pause. I wait in silence. The knocking comes again.

This time it's louder, just a little. I try to get up as the sound gradually increases in volume, but when I finally place my feet on the floor the

knocking stops.

I stagger across to the door, hoping against hope that whoever it is hasn't left. I'm in two minds – it might be Lilly or Hisao, in which case I want to see them. I want something to take my mind away from all this, to reassure me that everything will be fine. However, it could just as easily be one of my neighbours, or other classmates, wanting the latest gossip on my condition. I couldn't face that. Chances are higher to be the former, though, so I want to see. If only the faculty would let me install a peephole on my door! Things would be a bit easier, perhaps...

I reach the door and open it just a crack. In the corridor stands a young man with a slight smile on his face. My heart misses a beat, just once, and I feel a little relieved. Maybe it would have been better for me if he'd not come at all. Then again, I'm finally out of bed. I try to hide my hunger pangs and thirst (I have snacks and water in my room to keep me going anyway – after the previous years I've learned preparation is key), as I watch his face through the opening.

We're both silent for a while. I'm waiting for him to speak, lost at the same time in my own thoughts. Hisao doesn't say a word, however, and I can only assume he's waiting for the same thing. We each expect the other to begin our conversation, yet neither of us can bring ourselves to do so. Eventually I move away from the door, wondering what he must be thinking now – does he believe I'm simply leaving him out there, about to shut him out again? If so, I must be surprising him now, as I pull the door open a bit more.

He can see me fully now, my pink silk dressing gown, my hair still damp from the shower. I can't help but wonder why he's really here? I don't want to speculate, but after yesterday I feel like I can barely talk to him. Not because I don't want to. This is one of my rarer moments in these troubled times, when I feel calm and lucid. My tears have run out, my nightmares are limited to when I sleep, and now I'm awake I can look around me and try to come to some semblance of normality. I'm not saying it's not difficult. It's tougher than anything else I've ever done. But I've been fighting this for

half my life, and now with Lilly and Hisao I feel like maybe, just maybe, I'll be able to get through it. At least, I felt that way until yesterday morning, and less so when I found out that Lilly would be leaving for a fortnight. I still don't know Hisao well enough to deal with this so easily, as if it was ever easy, and I know that right now, we just don't really have a clue what to say to each other.

Hisao steps inside my room and closes the door behind him. I fiddle with my gown, weaving my fingers in the folds in my nervousness. I realise he's not going to say anything, and in a moment of clarity that surprises even myself, I speak instead. "Why..."

A simple comment, but it's enough to break a fragment of the iceberg building between us. "Because... uh... I uh... I... um..." He sighs as he finishes stammering. His speech now is worse than even mine at my worst. He continues: "I don't know. I just... wanted to see you, I guess."

I stop fidgeting and look up at his face. The look of concern, coupled with the worry and hint of surprise in Hisao's face, warms my heart a tiny bit. I feel a little better, and smile, nodding just once. "Um..." I start, "since you're here..."

How can I say this? Maybe we can get some degree of normality here. "I'd like to... play a game of chess with you..."

I've finally let him in. It's taken me so long, the build-up crumbling to pieces at the slightest provocation, but it was worth it for this moment. "It would be my pleasure," comes the reply, with a smile to match my own. I fetch a board from the cupboard, one of my very few personal possessions, and set a game up on the floor. The smiles continue as we start to play...

17. Act 3, Chapter 6: Plaster and Porcelain

Act 3 – Chapter Six: Plaster and Porcelain

It's the night of the party, sort of, to celebrate the one day I don't feel like celebrating. Not to mention Lilly's going-away, which I'd rather not be reminded of. Even so, I find it hard to stay depressed. I'm with friends, and I feel like I'm finally recovering at least somewhat from the other day, when I had the breakdown in class. I still haven't returned to lessons, but maybe tomorrow I'll be up to it. Possibly. It depends a lot on what happens tonight, and although I've heard stories from Lilly I haven't experienced so much myself the kind of fun that happens when Akira turns up to an event. Lilly told me she probably wouldn't be coming though, since she wouldn't be able to get away from work and make it here in time. Still, it'll be nice to spend some time with Lilly and Hisao together, and in a rather ironic twist it will, definitely, help me focus less on the hardest day of my year.

A knock on the door drags me away from my thoughts, as Lilly calls out, "Is that you, Hisao?"

"Yeah, it's me," comes the reply, and I rise to unlock the door and let him in. He enters as I quickly return to my place on the floor opposite Lilly, smiling briefly at him as he walks in. Hisao locks the door behind him, without needing to be asked. Rather perceptive really. He sits on the floor between us, on one side of the low table where our evening tea is already set up. I can't help but notice him steal a few glances at the plain brown bag next to Lilly, but if he can tell what's inside he doesn't give it away. Which is a shame, really. I have even less idea than he does, and I'd like to know myself, but if Lilly doesn't want us to know yet then I guess it's her decision.

"Hey, Lilly?" asks Hisao. She finishes her own drink before replying in the affirmative. Hisao continues, "I was just wondering about that brown bag..."

How cheeky he is! I wouldn't have dared to ask of my own accord, but Lilly smiles a little in a playful manner, in the direction of his voice, before

answering. "That would be Akira's present. Unfortunately she said she was working and can't join us." Nevertheless, she reaches a hand into the bag and feels around a little before pulling two long necked items from its depths.

"Wine..." I comment, realising now why Lilly was so adamant about the door being locked. She must have known already, considering she knows full well what Akira is like (more so than I do, naturally). The bottles are full and still sealed, one red and one white, as she places them both on the table between us all.

"Alcohol? Seriously? Are you sure this is a good idea?" I'm almost surprised that Hisao would be so considerate of the rules at Yamaku, more so than Lilly, who fails to hide her apparent joy as she laughs at the 'present'. A present for who exactly?

"These would be the presents from my sister. I know it's a bit questionable, but a little shouldn't hurt." I know that Lilly has had alcohol before, she mentioned to me once that she's occasionally partaken the odd glass with a meal, but now I'm starting to think she wasn't being entirely honest. She seems far too happy that Akira decided two bottles of wine would be an appropriate present for a soon-to-be eighteen year old. Maybe if we weren't in Japan, it would be fine, but if the faculty were to find out, missing lessons would be the least of my worries.

Unfortunately, Hisao also seems a bit eager to break the rules. I'm hardly a stickler for following the rulebook, certainly not to Shizune levels, but there are still limits. "Well, in that case, I won't complain," he says. "They don't look bad, either."

I have to concede, he has a point.

"Shall I open one?" asks Lilly, leaning forwards.

"Sure," Hisao replies, "I'll get some..."

BANG. BANG. BANG. Sorry, that was the best way I could really say it. I think. Three loud knocks suddenly come from Lilly's door, shocking us enough that I swiftly turn my head to see what's happening, while Lilly closes her eyes (not that there's much need, I guess) and listens for any further sound. "Who is it?" she calls. A familiar voice answers with the slightest, barest hint of a Scottish accent.

"Lemme in, I'm cold!"

Lilly sighs in a sort of defeated, yet pleased, resignation, raising a hand to signal myself or Hisao to open the door. I rise and unlock it, not one hundred percent certain but still reasonably happy that the intrusion is from someone friendly, not the staff of Yamaku. As the door opens, a tall, blonde woman walks in, not so far into her twenties, wearing a dark suit that does little to enhance her feminine features. "Happy birthday, Hanako," she greets me with as I move back to let her in.

"Th-thank you... Akira..." I bow slightly and smile at her weakly, happy to see her but also a bit nervous in anticipation of how the night is likely to continue. At least, according to Lilly's stories. Apparently Akira is a bit of a hard drinker, and the wine she provided is likely to help us along the same path tonight, albeit with a lower level of tolerance on our parts. We walk back to the table and take our seats, Akira sitting opposite Hisao.

"It's nice to have your company after all, Akira," says Lilly. "Did work let you off?"

"Yep." comes the reply. "I have to go back there in a bit, but I managed to get enough of a break to drive down." As she speaks, Akira has a slightly odd look on her face, kind of pouting but endearing at the same time. When she finishes talking, she looks over at Hisao. I'm not sure what Lilly has said about him to her sister, but whatever has been mentioned I'm a little nervous, even if that's rather irrational. "So... this would be Hisao, then?" Maybe we should have warned him actually. Akira takes informality to new levels. Maybe it's the Western influence in her upbringing. While Lilly has clearly taken the Japanese influence and embraced it, Akira has always

been more forward and happy to take a... less traditional approach to interacting with people. Regardless of the impression her suit gives.

While Hisao nods in response, Lilly directs her own comments to directly to him. "Sorry for not introducing you, Hisao. This is Akira Satou, my elder sister."

"I see. Nice to meet you." Upon hearing Hisao's reply, Akira claps her hands together loudly, making me jump a little. It's enough to make Akira hesitate, a small miracle in itself, before she carries on in her usual stride.

"Well then, I assume the presents got through?" Got through what? Yamaku isn't exactly renowned for its airport-like security and constant border patrols. "No point in waiting, considering Hisao and the birthday girl look like they're pretty eager."

I wince a tiny bit at that word, though no-one seems to notice, and glance at Hisao. Opposite me Lilly giggles, while Hisao turns away. He's not exactly great at hiding his feelings on things, which for me is both a blessing and a curse. I suppose if he does feel anything for me the way I hope he does, however naive my hopes may be, I want to know, and yet I want it to stay hidden. Maybe he can hide his feelings after all, or maybe not and I'm just clutching at non-existent straws. The wine is a different matter though, as he seems a touch embarrassed to have been caught so easily in his desire.

Our eyes meet, and I can tell Hisao is just as keen to try the wine as I am. For my part, though, I'm particularly interested in trying it with him. Maybe he can tell, maybe I'm not so good at hiding things as well (though years of experience suggest otherwise), as he quickly changes to a look of indifference that does nothing to fool the female population of the room. I rise to look for some glasses, while Akira uncorks the first bottle, and Hisao pours the four servings with white wine. I'm not certain Akira should be drinking, given she mentioned she was driving, but as nobody else mentions it I stay silent.

"Here's to Hanako, and to Lilly's trip," Hisao says, as we raise our glasses in toast. "Cheers," we all call, though my own cry is punctuated with my usual

stammer. We take sips of our wine, which has a remarkably fruity and sweet flavour. Apparently Hisao likes it as much as I do. "This isn't too bad," he says. "I was expecting something... harsher."

"If you hadn't liked it, I have a few other varieties you could have chosen from." What does Akira mean by that? Did she bring even more wine with her?

"You sound like you know your stuff when it comes to wines." Hisao speaks with a tinge of admiration, which again brings with it that mild pang of envy on my part. Those feelings still surface occasionally, but they're becoming less so now. Maybe I'm starting to realise, subconsciously, that it really is irrational of me. In a way I suppose on that level I'm just clinging to the idea of someone actually caring about me, whether I deserve it or not.

"Only a bit," Akira replies. "I'm more of a beer kind of person." To be fair, her appearance suggests that more than it does the whole 'wine connoisseur' personality. "I have the drinking side down pat, though." She refills her drink as she speaks and takes a long sip. So long that when her head finally comes forward again, there's not a trace of wine left in her glass.

I steal a look at Lilly, who doesn't seem impressed. It doesn't stop her from gently sipping her own drink, though. "Anyway," she says, "now that Akira's gift has been opened and sampled, shall we move on to ours?"

"G-gifts?" I shouldn't be too surprised, given what Hisao told me on the day of my breakdown, about his and Lilly's trip to the city. Nevertheless I wasn't really prepared for this. I suppose I'd just put it to the back of my mind.

"That's right, we got you presents. It's your birthday, after all." Again, no-one notices me wince as she says that, but to be fair it's a bit less noticeable anyway this time. "This is from me," Lilly continues. She hands me an ornately wrapped package that looks a little like a long, thin lump. I carefully take the bindings off, to reveal a beautiful doll in a green dress. It looks so beautiful, and I say as much to my closest friend. I turn it around as I speak, taking in the intricate detail and the hand-painted features that make it stand out so much. It's the perfect companion for my collection.

"I'm glad that you like it," Lilly replies. "Hisao picked it out, to be honest."

With this new revelation, I feel my heart stop again, picking up after the briefest of pauses. In a way it's slightly apt that Hisao, who has trouble with his own heart, should evoke the same reaction in me, even for such different reasons. "Y-yes, I like it. Th-thank you, Lilly and H-Hisao." It's a bit of an under-reaction, really, as I don't merely like this present. Before I can reaffirm my happiness, though, Hisao chimes in.

"Actually, I got you something else..." He reaches down into his bag and pulls out another gift, something bit larger and a lot flatter than the doll. "Here. Happy birthday." I start to unwrap it, again taking the utmost care not to damage whatever is inside. I realise what Hisao has bought me when I notice the oh so familiar and comforting sight of squares of black and white beneath the paper.

"Oh!" I exclaim in delight, running my fingers across the smooth surface, when I push a hidden catch or trigger that opens up a slot on the side of the board. Inside, I take out a piece at random. The white queen. Maybe it's a sign, but then again I could just be seeing things that aren't really there. For a white piece, it's not as bleached as one would think, its hue holding more of a greyish tint, though the black pieces are dyed like jet. I glance upwards at Hisao without actually querying this, but he answers my unspoken question anyway.

"They're coral. Natural coral, undyed. Or so I'm told." I can't believe this. I've never been shown so much kindness by anyone, especially since the accident. They say that there's a trigger for most things, some point of focus that acts as a key instigator for people's feelings, or motivations, or their lives in general. I don't know how true that is, but this would certainly count as one for me, if such things are to be believed.

"Thank you, Hisao..." I can barely speak, my words come as a whisper. He must have heard me, though.

"No problem. It's your birthday, after all." And for the first time tonight, when hearing that word, I don't shy away.

"That's right... my birthday..." I can't avoid hesitating, but the natural instinct for me to avoid the whole idea of my... my birthday... is noticeably less now. For the first time I feel like I can finally get through these days without breaking again.

I look around me as I close the board. Regardless of my own feelings, my own happiness increasing tenfold and more now, Akira seems kind of wary, as if she fears saying or doing the wrong thing. Maybe Lilly told her what happened the other day, which I wouldn't blame Lilly for. Hisao is watching the others as intently as I am, though he doesn't hide it the way I do. Lilly's eyes are still closed, a faint smile on her face. A male voice rises before I can consider what Lilly may be thinking, though. "I'll have to play you again sometime."

Another natural instinct jumps into action before I can consciously hold it back. "I'll... make sure I play you first..."

I lean against the bed, finally happy and content. Surrounded by my friends I feel as if nothing can stop me, and I can finally get by and start to recover from my demons. I've all but forgotten the impending departure of both Lilly and Akira, though their trip will be short it seems like a distant dream for me. I clutch the chessboard and the doll to me, treasuring them and holding them as if they were a part of me. Maybe they are, in a way. Symbols that, whatever I may think in my darkest moments, I am not alone. "Thank you, Lilly. Thank you, Hisao."

The silence continues, but as I thank my friends I drop the queen on the floor. A quick scramble to retrieve it, praying in my head that it's not damaged, and I set the doll and the chessboard on the floor beside me where they'll be safer. In my nerves I take a longer sip of my wine, then another, then a larger gulp, just to deal with the tension created within my own mind.

"Hey, easy there, you shouldn't drink it that fast..." Hisao looks at me with concern and moves his hand to ease my descent into inebriation. Lilly takes a slightly dimmer view, however, her tone suggesting him to be something of a killjoy.

"It is a party, Hisao..." Nevertheless, there's another edge to her voice that I easily pick up on, one of concern. I ease back, though not by much, while after a small pause Lilly starts to drink a bit more. She takes a different approach, however, with lots of small sips as opposed to a few larger gulps. After another pause, Hisao starts to follow her lead.

"Since this is kind of a going-away party for you as well, I hope you enjoy your trip at least a little, Lilly. Hopefully your aunt will be okay."

I follow Hisao's sentiments, concern driving my words as well. "I-I hope your aunt is okay too, Lilly..." With this, I can't help but notice a flash of surprise on the faces of all present. It's not too shocking to my mind, though. I may not have any relatives, any surviving at least, but that doesn't mean I can't wish others and their families well. To do any less would be an insult, I feel. To my own family, and to theirs.

"My my, thank you both," Lilly replies. "I'll be sure to convey your thoughts to my family when I meet them."

"It'll all be fine in the end, Lilly. Don't worry about it." Akira takes a less sentimental view, but behind her words I can still feel a sense of worry. Lilly wears her heart on her sleeve, at least a lot more than her sister does, but there's still a hidden edge that comes out on occasion. In contrast, Akira hides things a lot better, but beneath her hard exterior there's still a softer side. Yin and yang, I guess.

The mood is certainly a lot more depressing now. The conversation has dried up, what little there was to begin with, and we're lost in our thoughts. Maybe he's trying to get things moving again, maybe he just wants to cheer us up, but Hisao is a welcome distraction when he reminds us of our other obligations here. "Well then, shall we start on the cake?"

"Y-yes, please..." I have the advantage of knowing more than Lilly does in this situation, it seems. I didn't miss out on seeing it surreptitiously hiding in Hisao's bag when I let him in earlier.

"Cake?" she asks. "I didn't know there was any cake..."

"I picked one up before I came," says Hisao the Resourceful, "along with some snacks."

"Well done, Hisao. At least one of us remembered to bring one." As Lilly speaks, Hisao retrieves the cake from his bag and begins to cut it into slices. It's chocolate, which I suppose will go well with the wine. We stop talking for a while as we all eat.

It's starting to get late, and my head feels a little bit woozy. Not in a bad way, more like I feel a bit dizzy but I can't remember why. I think I know what it is though, the wine, as I try to pour myself another glass and end up with half of it on the table. Not the floor though, the carpet is safe from the wine attack... we'll have to wipe it up from the table though which doesn't matter quite so much... "S-sorry, Lilly..." I say, feeling bad about the accident. "I didn't mean to make a mess... I..."

"Don't worry, I've got it..." Hisao comes to the rescue, yet again, wiping up the spill. He's had a bit less to drink than me. I wonder if it shows? Lilly pulls me into her arms, lovely and soft and warm, and gives me a big hug as I worry about the spill.

"It's okay, Hanako. I'm just happy you're here." I nod in response, happy as well, but still worrying about the wine staining the carpet. It looks fine to me, though. Was it the white or the red I spilled? I can't really remember... Lilly's arms feel nice, though. Like a big sister, maybe...

We pull away after a while, as Hisao continues to mop up and Akira looks on with a faint smile on her face. Lilly reaches for the other bottle, and I take it from her and uncork it, pouring two more glasses. I guess I'm mostly to blame for the fact the other bottle is almost empty, my head definitely feels like it is. Akira notices as well. I think.

"Looks like you're enjoying the wine, then," she says. "Just don't go too crazy with it after this, mind." We all nod and agree, but I don't really feel like taking it easy. Tonight is about making sure I have happy memories, and the wine is helping to no end with that. I'm already laughing at lots

more things, everything seems a lot more nice and fun and I'm not thinking as much about the darker things that I usually think about when I'm getting nearer to my birthday...

I play with the doll Lilly got me, idly twirling my fingers around its hair, happy to be with my best friends. A hiccup later and suddenly the doll is on the floor, on its side. Maybe I've had a bit too much. Maybe. I can't help but feel really tired, though. Perhaps I should go to bed? I think so, maybe. I'm sure the doll would want to as well, if she could talk. I don't think she likes being on the floor too much.

"I... think I should maybe go to bed. T-thank you, Hisao, thanks Lilly and Aaaaakiraaaa..." I try to avoid the long drawn out drawl as I say Akira's name, and fail miserably. It's such a nice name, though, I want to keep on saying it. Akira. Akira. Akira Akira Akira Akira Akiiiiira. I guess I giggle a little, but I don't really remember. Hisao could probably tell me...

"Here, let me give you a hand." As Akira gets up I cough a bit. Maybe I'm a bit more drunk than I thought. It was nice wine, though, fruity and fun.

"Hisao, would you please?" Lilly smiles when she says that. Does she know something I don't know? I think she does, she knows lots of things I don't know. Like English, or Braille. Or how to be a student representative. Or how to get around with a cane. Or how to drink wine without being tooooooo drunk. I know things she doesn't know though. Like how much I like Hisao...

"S-sure," he says. "No problem." He picks up the chess set he bought me while I pick up my doll, and give him my other hand. I wobble as we walk out to the corridor. Wobble wobble. Like jelly. I wish we'd had jelly, I've never had jelly at a birthday party before. Chocolate is nice, but it doesn't wobble like jelly does. I keep bumping into Hisao, making him wobble as well. We're like two big jelly towers wobble-wobbling into the hall. I don't want to drop the doll, though. I wish I wasn't quite as much like jelly as I am now.

When we get to my room I turn to my shelf with my other special doll, and make a space carefully. As carefully as I can while I'm wobbling around. That's another word I like. Wobble. I place the new doll with her companion, saying "There you go... you'll be safe in here..." I step back, stumble a little and regain my balance just about. I don't think I like being like jelly any more, if I fall over I won't be able to bounce back up. I look down and start to sway a bit.

"Are you... going to be all right?" Hisao's still here. I want to do something now, but I don't know if I have the courage. I'm still drunk though, so my body does it for me as I stumble forward straight into Hisao's arms. This is nice. Better than a Lilly hug, and that was nice too. I put my arms around Hisao too and stay there for a while. He doesn't hug me back though. I'm thinking it's not like a Lilly hug at all now. It still feels nice but not as much as I thought. "Hanako..." he says. I don't want to let go though. I want him to hug me as well, and then it'll be a lot nicer and he can stay here with me while I sleep and we can be silly little drunk people together, even if he's not as drunk as I am...

"But I want to staaaay with you and Lillyyyy."

"You know I can't. You're a girl and I'm a guy, after all, and Lilly needs to sleep." Awwww, I don't want them to go to sleep though, I want to stay up late and have more fun with my best friends, and I want Hisao to stay with me alllllll night. "Don't worry," he continues, "I'll see you again tomorrow, okay?"

He puts his hand on my head and I take advantage of that, pushing myself closer to his chest. I hope he doesn't have a heart attack now, that wouldn't be very good at all. I can feel it beating and I try to listen, pressing my ear against Hisao's chest and trying hard to listen to the sound, but I can't hear much at all now and I think he moved back a little bit. I don't want him to move though. I'm nice and comfy now. I have a lovely pillow who doubles as a very very nice boy and I get a bit annoyed as he starts to push me away.

"I don't want you to go..." I tell him.

"Hanako, please. Akira and Lilly are going to start thinking weird stuff if I take too long here." What weird stuff? I think I know... did Lilly know? Or was she just imagining things? I wouldn't mind imagining things too... but I'm all sleepy and I can't stay focused on imagining what I want to imagine and what Lilly might have imagined and whatever Hisao thinks they might be imagining. I imagine. Hic.

I don't... I don't want you to go, Hisao...

"Sorry about tonight, Hanako. I know you probably won't remember any of this, but... happy birthday. I'm sorry I couldn't do more for you." I look up at Hisao as he speaks, and his eyes are the last thing I remember before I finally fall asleep. My dreams will be happy ones tonight, if I can remember what I was trying to imagine that I think Lilly imagined...

Actually, let's not go too far into that. Some things are a bit more private than others...

18. Act 3, Chapter 7: Not So Swift Recovery

Act 3 – Chapter Seven: (Not So) Swift Recovery

I wake up with a sore head and a dry mouth. My eyes hurt a little, not from lack of sleep (the complete opposite, in fact), but more from a general ache all over. I've never felt so bad. Nausea hits me as I struggle to lift my body out from under the sheets. My memories of the party are still slightly fuzzy at first, but soon begin to sharpen...

My memories! I suddenly realise, as I try to hydrate myself with gulps of water from the tap, just how foolish I was then. Not wanting Hisao to leave... it's true that I wanted him to stay. I was so clingy towards him that I realise how stupid I must have looked. The embarrassment mounts while I prepare myself for school. I can't miss class today, not again. It would be too suspicious. I don't exactly feel like going, truth be told, but for once the reason is purely physical, rather than mental. The hangover isn't quite affecting me, not like before, but I still don't feel up to the task. Even so, I have to make the effort.

Even though I feel so bad I still feel the happiness from the party. As if I don't have to constantly feel like my life is worthless, as if I don't deserve the things I want or like I don't deserve to have people who care about me. Lilly, Hisao, Akira, they all came and helped me enjoy a time, for once, that has always previously been nothing but misery. Though I know that after today, and especially when Lilly has gone to Scotland, I'll revert back to those old feelings, I know that it's nice to have something good to hold on to, however temporary. It gives me hope.

I'm among the first to class, despite the headache, and take my seat in silence. Mutou-sensei is already here, marking papers and preparing for today's lessons. I contemplate reading through some of the week's material so as to remain ahead, enough for the coming days, when the door opens. I look up, startled, to see a familiar figure who, I suspect, may also be suffering as much as I am.

We make eye contact, before I turn away and stare straight down through sheer nerves. I wonder what he remembers from the party? I dread to think...

By now the rest of the class has been pouring in steadily, including the aforementioned Misha and Shizune. They look across at me as I try to avoid everyone's gazes, but I give no sign as to my current state of recovery. There's no telling what they would do with that kind of information. Over the noise of my fellow students, I hear Mutou's voice, "Feeling better today?"

I'm startled, fearing what he knows about yesterday, until I hear Hisao reply, "Yeah. Thank you." I'm not sure if he's talking about that, or something else, but as long as nothing specific is mentioned I can probably rest easy. Nevertheless, I'm at edge all the way through morning lectures. When the lunch bell finally rings, my suspicions are made all the more worrying when Hisao turns up at my desk.

"Hanako... did you tell...?" Did Hisao have the same thoughts I did when he was asked how he was feeling? I shake my head in response.

"It's just..." I start.

"Just...?" Before I can answer Hisao, a slightly large pink mass materialises behind him, with a smaller purple creature at the side.

"Well hello there, Hicchan. It's nice to see you again today!" Her voice sounds curiously happy, even by Misha's standards. I'm not normally suspicious, save when it comes to my natural distrust of people's overtures of friendship, but Misha has me a little concerned now. Does she know about the party? The smile on Shizune's face reminds me of the Cheshire Cat, which only serves to fuel my feelings of doubt.

It appears that Hisao has the same thing in mind. "Hi Shizune, Misha. You, uh... you look happy to see me." I can sense the paranoia creeping into his voice, as much as an overreaction that may be. Or possibly not, given who we're now dealing with. Shizune's eyes are almost twinkling like a character

from an anime, her smile frozen in place. She continues to smirk as her hands fly faster than I've seen for a long time, as though she's excited to get her message across as quickly as possible.

"Not feeling well yesterday, Hicchan...?" Misha translates, her own smile evolving to match that of her companion. I'm relieved, but not by much. Something still smells fishy here, and despite the hour it's certainly not anyone's lunch. Does he not know?

"No," he replies, "no, I wasn't. But I'm feeling better now, at least."

The hands start moving again, the translation coming just as swiftly. "That's good to know, Hicchan."

"You sound like you're not being completely serious." I'm happy to hear Hisao shares my suspicions, though my gut instinct tells me that I'm about to be drawn into something here, and completely against my will.

"Oh no, Hicchan, we're genuinely pleased that you're all better now..." I know what this is about...

"In fact," Misha continues, "we were quite worried about you. After all..." Please don't say it...

"You, Hanako and Lilly were all absent from class on the same day."

I drop my eyes to the floor as Hisao lets out a large sigh. Shizune has us bang to rights, and there's precious little we can do about it. I look up at Hisao and notice him staring at Shizune, looking directly into her cat-like eyes. "I guess you have your own theories about this. Could you just kinda... not tell anyone?" I get the feeling his hopeful attitude is much too little and much too outdated. Misha is, of course, glad to confirm my fears in that regard.

"It's a bit late for that, Hicchan..." I sink and try to make myself look as small as possible, as I consider what my conscious mind had previously kept from me, ostensibly for my own protection. The looks I received from

people entering the room, the same looks levelled at Hisao as he made his arrival afterwards. Even the hint of concern in Mutou-sensei's eyes as I took my seat and began to read the course work, his voice as he asked Hisao about feeling better. I already knew, and was moments from telling Hisao before the president and her eternal assistant turned up, but it doesn't make the revelation to him any easier for me to deal with. Maybe I was naive to think we could keep it hidden, or contained, but I was hoping that if people noticed then at least they wouldn't care.

"The only reason why we're giving you such a hard time is that you ignored us yesterday morning!" The latest translation from Misha is a surprise to me, more than anything else revealed today. They went to his room? The pang of jealousy I've been trying to keep hidden starts to surface again, though only for a few brief seconds. No, the bigger concern is that he ignored them and went back to sleep, or so I assume.

"Oh right, the knocking," he says. So he did hear them, then. "That was you two?"

The grin has finally been wiped off Shizune's face as she signs a response, translated as ever by her pink curly cohort, though I can't avoid the sneaking thought that her indignant expression is as carefully manufactured as her smiles. "It was, and you left us there for ages after we'd taken all the effort of coming to your dormitory early in the morning."

I'm almost proud of Hisao, as much as I can muster the strength of mind and ego to possibly be, at the fact he was able to (with zero effort, literally) get on Shizune's nerves for once. It's not that I don't like her, but it's still amusing to see her nose out of joint over something so petty, even if it does mean she has a hold over us for whatever reason she can imagine. I may not have the courage nor the mind to do such things myself, but a girl can still dream. Besides, Lilly would certainly be pleased. "Sorry, I was having a... problem with nausea? A problem with nausea."

I take that back. Of all the things he could have said, a problem with nausea is the first he can come up with? However accurate it may be, it won't do a

thing to alleviate the suspicious minds of Misha and Shizune.

Dropping her head regardless, Shizune reaches into her pocket and pulls out a slightly crumpled piece of paper. Looking closer, I see that it's an envelope, with a sunflower motif, which she hands to Hisao. "This is what we were trying so hard to give you, Hicchan! You don't check your mail very much at all!" This explains why they went to see him yesterday, then. I don't want to be nosy, the envelope is none of my business, but I can't help but read Hisao's face as he takes it in. A single word escapes his lips, while his features register a touch of sadness and concern.

"Iwanako."

Iwanako? A name... I look at the people around me. Both Misha and Shizune are looking at Hisao with trepidation, as if they expect him to open the letter right now and read it aloud. I know that my own expression is a little more confused, though I actively make an effort not to show it. I want to know who this person is, the jealousy rearing its ugly head yet again and refusing to go down this time. However, I know that it's not my place to ask, not directly. That said, I still repeat the name in a meek voice, my curiosity too much for me to contain.

"It's nothing." Hisao's comment is abrupt, and it's clear he doesn't want people around him as he looks at whatever is inside. "Thank you for bringing me this, you two."

"I should think so, after what we went through to get it to you..." Misha's bubbly voice betrays her minor annoyance, however put-on and cutesy it may be, as Hisao says his goodbyes and leaves. There's still quite a bit of the lunch hour to go, and though we remain standing as he goes our interest is doomed to be unsatisfied. I choose not to follow him. After all, I know exactly what it is to keep secrets...

After a short while, I too take my leave. I don't really want to spend my lunch with Misha and Shizune, if only because I'm worried they'll start grilling me on why we were all absent from class yesterday. I don't think I'd be able to take it. Anyway, Lilly is probably waiting for us.

My guess is proved correct when I arrive at the tea room. Lilly tilts her face up in the direction of the creak as I gently close the door behind me. "Is that you, Hanako?" She's learned over time how to tell the exact sound I make whenever I close this door, a remarkable skill to have.

"Y... yes, it's me." A brief moment of silence passes, before I clarify, "H-Hisao's... not with me. Um, s-sorry."

"It's fine," she says, with a smile, much sweeter than any Shizune has made so far today. "You don't have to apologise for his absence. Though, I wonder where he is?"

I quickly explain the previous events, and about the letter Hisao received. "He wouldn't tell you what was written?"

"N-no, he didn't... he didn't open it near us. He must h-have waited until he'd l-left..."

"How curious. Still, I suppose it's best left to him to decide if he wants to share its contents. From what you've told me, it looks as though it's rather personal, and we shouldn't interfere."

I can only agree, and affirm as much to Lilly. "He... he skipped yesterday as w-well. I d-didn't know you did t-too..."

She laughs, just a little, as her cheeks turn a faint shade of pink. It reminds me of how she looked the other night, after the first glass of wine. "I must confess, I'm as guilty as you and Hisao. I didn't think the wine had affected me that much, but it seems I was mistaken. I didn't wake up until midday yesterday."

The unspoken implication, of course, is that she would have aroused too much suspicion if she'd suddenly arrived half a day late to a lecture. She continues, "I heard Misha in the corridor this morning, on the way to classes. She called my name, but I did a rather mean thing. I pretended I couldn't hear her!" We both begin to laugh, full belly chuckles as Lilly finishes speaking.

"I... I'm glad you're okay..." I continue smiling but with a tinge of sadness. I don't want Lilly to leave, though I understand she doesn't have a choice. She seems to understand my concern.

"It's only for a week or two, no more. I'm more concerned about you..." I don't deserve such concern, but the joy of the past couple of days (hangovers aside) intervenes and allows me this moment. "I actually had something in mind..."

"W... what?" I don't know what this 'something' is, but I get the feeling that it's something Lilly might have thought up in an attempt to make me feel a bit better. I only say that because of the way the conversation has segued onto the new topic of concern for me.

"It's something I thought of on the night of the party. Hisao's already agreed to it." Is she saying that because she knows if Hisao agreed, I'm more likely to? She still hasn't fully explained herself. "How would you be up for a little trip into town...?"

19. Act 3, Chapter 8: Halcyon

Act 3 – Chapter Eight: Halcyon

I can't even begin to imagine what the city is like for Lilly at night. The sounds and smells must be her only link to what's going on, since she can't see the bright lights of the stores and bars still open into the later hours. The journey here was pleasant enough, though. Akira drove us in her car, which was more than I was expecting (not that we'd have easily caught a bus and still made it here in any kind of good time). Even so I couldn't avoid holding on to the door as we went. Although the timing was good, Akira is a much more reckless driver than I'd have imagined. It's actually the first time I've been in her car, and it's not an experience I'm eager to repeat again soon. Which might be a problem assuming she's driving us back later...

"E-everything looks so p-pretty at night..." I say, more for Lilly's benefit than anyone else. Even though she can't see it, there's nothing stopping her imagining, and I'm happy to help her in that endeavour as long as is needed.

A passer-by catches my eye and I quickly glance toward the ground. Even in the dimmer light, the brighter store fronts highlight my features so much more, and I can't avoid shying away from the looks and stares I still receive now. I still feel as though everyone is watching me, even though in my heart and my logical mind I know that very few have actually shown a sign of noticing.

"Yeah," Hisao says, in response to my previous comment. "It does." It seems like he doesn't want to focus too much on small talk, but at the same time he's as curious as I am to where we're actually going. "So," he continues, "we're in the city. Any ideas on what to do?"

There isn't really a massive amount to do, except drink and eat, given the time of the evening, but a quick look at Akira suggests by her smile that she has something in mind. "You'll see," she says. "Just follow us."

I'm kind of not certain whether to trust her, but I follow my instinct and continue to follow. I assume Hisao had the same idea as he comes up

behind us. Unless he just didn't want to get left behind. In any case, neither of us force the subject; we'll see when we get there.

As we walk, I notice that Akira and Lilly are getting further away, though the increasing distance is remarkably subtle. I'm honestly not sure if they are deliberately doing it to give Hisao and I some space, or if it's an unconscious reaction on our parts to get some more time together. I mean, an unconscious reaction on my part, since I'm almost certain Hisao doesn't see me in that way. Why else would he have left me in my room the way he did at the party? I'm lost in my thoughts when I suddenly collide with a well-dressed man to my side.

"S-s-sorry...!" It's not Hisao I bumped into, but rather a middle aged businessman, who is already stumbling away half drunk and half apologising to me in return. I'm not sure why, it was my fault after all, and I hardly deserve the apology in any case. I swiftly move further up to join Hisao, who has already taken several steps ahead whilst I recovered from the previous minor incident.

As I get closer, Hisao surprises me by bringing one hand across my right shoulder, pulling me closer. My heart beats a little faster and my skin starts to feel warmer as I fight the urge to pull away. "Hisao?" I say, looking up.

"It's okay," he replies. "You can walk closer to me if you want."

I can hardly allow myself to hope that he might feel that way about me, the way I keep on wanting him to feel, more and more. I can't see anything in me that would possibly give him reason to feel that way. Even so, after a brief pause I decide to take this chance, and I'm sure it is just a chance, and nod my head.

We carry on, much closer, with Hisao's arm still wrapped around my shoulders. Akira and Lilly are rather far ahead now, and so we quicken our pace to catch up. As we get further from the large crowds and head through a maze of streets to more secluded and quieter establishments, I feel much safer in Hisao's embrace, as if I can finally begin to face whatever challenges lie ahead. It's a vain hope, I'm fairly certain, but a nice one.

We start to slow down as Akira finally stops outside a small door, leading in to a bar currently occupied mostly by middle aged men and women in smart business wear, a few smokers lingering outside. I can't help but look at Lilly's face as she smells the smoke, the painful grimace marring her otherwise pretty features. Sometimes I consider whether her other senses are heightened given she's been blind since birth. Perhaps to compensate? I've never asked though, and she hasn't mentioned it. Even so, if it smells so bad to me then it must be horrible for her.

Emanating from inside, the soft sounds of jazz are clearly audible, promising a calm space within. I know I've mentioned this to Lilly before, my favourite kind of music, so I'm assuming she and Akira planned this together. Either that, or she just happened to mention it to her suit-wearing sister, and Akira did the rest. Whichever case applies, it's hard for me to take in that they've done this all for my benefit. It makes me feel like I'm being a burden in some ways, but in others it makes me feel just a little bit special, in the nicest possible way.

"A jazz club. I have to admit, this isn't what I expected." I have to agree with Hisao's judgement on this one. Lilly, meanwhile, gives a tiny giggle and smiles in Akira's general direction.

"Somehow I feel like I should have known it, Akira." So Lilly wasn't in on this as well? I know she arranged the evening in the first place, but I guess she left the fine details to her older sibling. A little bit of a surprise, but not a massive one.

As we chat I start to notice that without Hisao's arm around me I'm incredibly exposed. Passers-by look over at us, and I can't avoid the feeling that they're really looking at me, without quite looking. My rational mind tells me that it's because we're almost all a bit too young to be found in a place like this, but the dominant part of my brain maintains that it's me they're focused on. For all the usual reasons. I don't want to end up panicking here like I did in class before. I quickly glance at the others, Hisao more so than anyone else, hoping against hope that somebody will say or do something to ease the tension I feel.

"Hey, c'mon," Akira says, unknowingly coming to my rescue. "Just because you're teenagers, doesn't mean you can't have a taste. Right?" Whenever she says something like that it makes me think that Akira got away with rather a lot herself as a teenager.

"Well... I don't really mind the music, if that's what you mean." I'm not sure Hisao really grasps what Akira is trying to say, but I'm not going to correct him. Right now I'm more concerned with keeping myself sane and calm in the increasingly awkward atmosphere. Can't we just go inside already, or continue walking?

"I-I... don't mind it... either..." I decide to make my own little comment, if only to get my feelings across and push the others to make a decision. It's hard for me to speak and I can hear the stutter in my voice, but I don't want my nerves to get the better of me yet again. Especially not when Hisao is here. I can't even bring myself to meet his eyes, reverting to my usual staring at the ground as I speak.

My words must have had some effect though, as Akira beams a wide smile and enters the bar, Lilly following closely. I take a last look at Hisao before following him inside, eager to be away from the crowds on the street.

I can see now the source of the music, a live band playing on a makeshift stage in the corner to our right. Most of the patrons are at least in their forties, some a little younger, making me feel even more out of place even considering the bar is much less busy than the street was. Nevertheless, I can calm myself down a little, though some of that is forced, as the others here are engaged in their own conversations or listening to the band, and not so interested in my own features. I try to let myself drift away to the soft and delicate sounds, engaging with the music in a way that makes me feel relaxed and safe.

In the corner of my eye I see Akira, then Lilly, take seats at the bar, before the bartender walks across. "Good evening, ladies," he says. "What will it be?"

Akira's response is hardly surprising to me, having known her for quite some time now. "Just a scotch, thanks. Lilly?"

"May I have a glass of cham-" Before Lilly can finish, my attention is fully grabbed by the sight of an elbow clad in a dark cotton blazer hitting her in the side. "Orange juice, please." I almost laugh, but stop myself just in time. However, I still think Lilly heard my intake of breath.

"No problem, coming right up." The bartender turns away and begins to serve the order, and I can't avoid a feeling of slight indignation that Akira has forgotten about Hisao and I. Not that I would speak up, of course. She turns swiftly, however, and mentions to us that it's our turn to head to the bar.

"You two want anything, or are you just gonna stand there?" she says, a mischievous grin on her face. I'm not entirely sure what to do. After the party I'm not certain I want to drink alcohol again, but surely I'll be able to handle it okay if I can moderate myself. That's assuming I could be served. I think Lilly would have been able to order her glass of champagne if Akira hadn't stepped in, so maybe that was more sisterly concern than anything else. Then again, I don't think I'd be able to get away with it myself. Even if the bartender were to serve me alcohol the other patrons would be bound to notice, and wherever we choose to sit it will be near someone whose eyes I just know will be drawn to my scars.

In the furthest corner to the entrance is a set of billiard tables. It also happens to be the only part of the bar that is deserted, the others all engaged in the music.

"We'll go play pool over there." I guess Hisao saw them as well. His words appear to have been directed more at Akira and Lilly than to me, but he looks across at me first, perhaps to test my response? I was thinking the exact same thing in any case, so I have no objections. As Akira shrugs and turns back to her newly arrived drink, I begin to walk over to the tables. I can hear Lilly's response to the unstated comment as I leave them together.

"It seems you'll have to put up with only me for company. How unfortunate." As I look back quickly, I see Lilly with a wide smile across her face, while Akira puts on a playful pout.

"Have fun, you two," she replies, refusing to be drawn in. I continue walking as Hisao follows, something of a reversal to the events so far. A rare reversal for us indeed.

As we carry on I keep my eyes fixed on the table furthest away, Hisao close behind me. I have no idea what the painting on the wall is (truth be told it looks like something that girl at school, Rin Tezuka, would paint), but it hardly catches my attention as we weave our way through a multitude of chairs and drunken businessmen. I'm feeling calmer as we get closer, and when we finally reach our target I have the confidence to speak again. That being said, I probably should have asked Hisao this before.

"You... kn-know how to play?"

"I'm no expert," he replies, "but yeah, I do."

"Then, um... eight-ball?" It's a game I'm not only familiar with, but also pretty decent at, though having not played for some time I am a little rusty. I used to play eight-ball at the orphanage, albeit on a much smaller table, with a few of the younger children. Eventually one of the staff started playing against me during his spare time, and taught me how to get fairly good. Hisao responds with a simple "Sure", and we work together to prepare the table for our game.

It seems like our interactions have mostly been revolving around games of some kind, from the silly and simple floor tiles game to chess and now pool. It's like a meeting of minds, and every game teaches me a little more about my opponent. About the boy who has just suddenly leaped into my life and refuses to let go. I wonder what our games have taught him about me?

I pass Hisao one of the two cues and he studies the tip, making sure it's chalked properly, while he makes idle chatter about the game. "So you've

played before?" he asks me.

"Once... or twice. I j-just kind of... know the rules." I feel bad by understating the level of skill I have, but I can be a bit competitive at times, and I don't want him to feel intimidated. I have no idea how good Hisao is at the game either, so we're effectively entering with equal information about each other's talent. It's interesting to think about what we might learn with regards to each other during our match. I pause, before finally ending the silence between us, since it's clear Hisao doesn't plan to. "Wh-who'll... b-break?"

A wait a few seconds before Hisao pulls a coin from his pocket. The obvious solution. "I'll take heads," he says. "You're tails." I nod my assent as he tosses the coin to catch it in one hand. A quick glance and the results are announced. "Looks like it's you that gets to break."

I nod once more, take up my cue, and move to where the cue ball is waiting for me to take the first shot. I concentrate as I line up the position of the cue and the balls on the green velvet, getting into the same frame of mind I always try to reach when I play chess. I focus hard and push all other concerns away from my brain, before striking the pale sphere hard in its centre. The result is a wide spread of spots and stripes scattered across the table. I've given Hisao an easy chance to score here, but at the same time I too have a good position to work from.

I move back and allow Hisao to take his first shot. I watch as he sinks a ball with hardly any effort, but it's a little while before he notices it himself. "Well done," I congratulate him. It's good to see him actually playing well, and I feel like this will be a fun game, even if I can't quite escape my competitive nature whenever we play any kind of game. Even on a night specifically geared for me to relax and put my many troubles behind me.

"Guess I'm stripes, then," says Hisao. He steps aside for me to take the next shot, but I pause. I've barely felt able to really talk to him at any point, not properly, and there's still so much we don't know about each other, but that I'm too afraid to mention. I worry that if I tell him more about myself it will

only serve to drive him away, to make him feel like I'm too much of a burden. I don't want to be any trouble to anyone, but it's as if that's all I've ever been, or ever will be. Even to Lilly...

Hisao startles me from my reverie. "What's up?" I quickly think of something to say, the stammer coming out in full force against my will. I'm not ready to talk about myself just yet. The night is still too early for that.

"It's just... you had a... n-nice smile. Do you like... playing this?"

Hisao lets out the briefest of sighs and leans against the pool table. "I like playing, yeah. I think I was smiling because it's really nostalgic, though." I'm curious, as that's effectively the same reason I like playing this game too. I tilt my head, and it's clear that Hisao has picked up on my interest as he continues to speak. "Me and my friends used to play pool in the game centres near where we lived pretty often, and at night too."

For me, I think night-time is a little easier, since in the dark no-one can see my face quite so easily. However, for someone who still has a family, who still has people who should look out for him, how could he spend time outside at night, and as often as Hisao describes? "W-wouldn't your parents..."

"My parents both worked, so they didn't mind me not being in the house. I stayed on top of schoolwork pretty easily as well, so there was plenty of time to do other stuff at night." I'm not entirely sure what to make of that, having no real frame of reference. It's actually starting to sting a little, even though I know Hisao didn't mean to bring up such memories and thoughts in me. I like being able to talk to him about these things, but at such a time, and thinking about such topics, I don't want to dive too deeply down this particular rabbit hole. Not until I feel a bit calmer. Maybe I can discuss other personal matters later, but the talk of Hisao's parents is just making me a little uncomfortable.

He seems to sense this, and gets off the table, allowing me to take my next shot. I line up the cue carefully and allow myself to slip back into the focused state of mind I cultivated for chess and other games. It's not easy,

but I think I can see an opportunity. It'll be a tough shot though. I lean forward, careful not to let my feminine assets knock any of the closer balls, and begin to calculate the angles in my head and the exact power that I need when striking to achieve my goals. It's an incredibly awkward angle, but a few practice movements make me more confident that I have the right position. A moment later and the cue ball is speeding towards its target, deftly passing between the surrounding balls so closely that you could almost swear the changing air pressure as the cue ball passes is enough to push them slightly. In any case, it's a tense atmosphere between Hisao and I as together we watch the spotted ball on the very edge of the corner pocket tilt, and slowly fall.

I'm actually surprised it went in, and Hisao appears to share my feelings here. "Man, that was a hard shot," he says. "If you can pull that off, I don't think I have much hope."

Personally I think he's being overly complimenting towards me, and overly critical of himself. Still, it's a nice feeling, to receive praise for something, especially as games are really the one area where I can say I ever deserve even a modicum of praise in the first place. "I'm not... th-that good..."

"It's not just the shot though; even when lining it up you looked really serious. You're like this with chess, too." So he noticed that.

"I just... like those kinds of things..." I set my cue to one side and give Hisao a look. Not an awkward one, though. rather, on my face is an embarrassed smile. I fidget a little, wondering. Am I ready to say anything more about myself? There are parts of my past I haven't even told Lilly. Things that she's probably considered, and speculated on, and I don't feel I have the right to say anything on that, but certainly things she doesn't know for sure. If I do this, I'm taking a big leap, committing myself to whatever friendship or (dare I even imagine) relationship Hisao and I can cultivate. Am I really ready for this?

I'll never know if I don't try. It's the biggest step I've taken, and Miss Yumi would be proud of me for even considering this, but I have to do it.

"When I was in the orphanage.." I've started, so I should carry on. No fear, Hanako. No fear... "I just... k-kept doing the things I liked... before."

I pause briefly, and Hisao waits, looking at me patiently. "If I p-played games with the others, th-that was enough for the helpers there, so..." I break off, nerves starting to mount. However, I notice that I've stuttered a lot less than before. Much less than usual. It shocks me a little, that I could be so calm even for the briefest of moments with this...

"If it's okay for me to ask... what was it like for you at the orphanage?"

Hisao's question catches me off guard. "W-why do you want to know?" I sound more defensive than I intended to. Are my barriers coming back up? It's a struggle to stay open enough to be able to talk to Hisao like this, and keeping myself defended enough to be able to function in an environment like this. I backtrack a little and decide to answer. "I'll... tell you, but..."

"But...?"

In for a rin, in for a yen... "Could you... t-tell me who I-Iwa... n-nako... is?" I could feel the stammering there. I can't imagine ever being so bold before in my life.

Hisao looks puzzled for a moment, before he realises what I mean. "Iwanako...? Oh, the letter." He pauses for a second before replying. "She's... someone I used to like."

I feel the now familiar pang hit me, but force myself to stay calm and neutral. Hisao chose his words carefully, it seems to me. I have no idea how he feels about her now, but I don't want to get too deeply invested in the topic, given how personal a matter it must be. Clearly he doesn't want to talk about it. I'm just grateful that he deigned to reply in the first instance.

Hisao takes his next shot, and misses, though it's fairly close. My opponent is rather more skilled than I initially gave him credit for. We refrain from talking for a while, and I start to alternate once more between relaxing to the soft music and focusing carefully on the game.

"Nicely done," and the silence between us is broken as I pocket another ball. I want to tell him more about me now. It wasn't as difficult as I thought it would be, and this is probably as good a time as any to gauge just how Hisao feels about me. I don't look at him, though. Staring at the table only serves to make it easier for me to speak.

"The orphanage... was nice. It felt a bit like Yamaku does... and the staff were r-really kind. But as th-the years went on, I realised something. I was d-different." I was wrong, it is harder, and as I continue the difficulty increases just as much as my determination progresses. If Hisao is willing to open up to me, then I have to do the same for him, and let him in. I push myself to continue.

"M-most of the children there were up for adoption, just like I was. But unlike me... they gradually left, o-one by one. By the time I went to Yamaku, I was... among the oldest children there." The stammering is still noticeable, but I'm pushing it deeper down, desperate to rid myself of these feelings that have plagued me all this time, this sense of being unable to make my voice heard. "For a while, I h-helped with some of the y-younger children, b-but eventually..." I'm stopped by a hand on my shoulder.

The comforting feel of Hisao's touch brings me down from my rambling reverie, halting me in my tracks and providing sweet relief from my ongoing diatribe against myself.

"It's okay." I wait, then nod and set my cue down.

"Do you... really think so?"

"Yeah, I think so. Even while Lilly's away, I'll be around to protect you, right?"

With this, I look deeply into his eyes. I don't need help, I need to be alone to suffer and to show that I can overcome my past. I don't want help, either. Even so, it's nice to hear the offer. I can't bring myself to tell Hisao how I really feel about being helped on this. I wonder what he's thinking now?

"Hanako...?" he asks, concerned about my silence.

"I-I understand. Thank you." I smile and finally avert my gaze. As I start to look at the table, Hisao moves away to make his next shot. The final shot of the game, as it turns out. "Ah..."

He's sunk the eight-ball. An excuse to move away from the awkward topic... "That was an awful shot, you win," he says, glancing at me. "It seems I'm getting pretty rusty after all this time." It's getting late, so I hurriedly move to shoot every ball in turn, by means of the cue ball, and sink everything still left on the table, spots and stripes alike.

"Um, Hisao..." He's given me his confidence, and agreed to be there for me. Even if the help is undeserved, and to some small degree, unwanted, the offer itself and the sentiment behind it is more than welcome and more than appreciated. I avoid meeting his eyes as I say, "I'm... here for you as well..."

"Ah..." He makes to speak, but Hisao cuts himself off as soon as the sound escapes his lips. I hope he knows that despite everything, I am being sincere.

We tidy everything away in silence, in a manner reminiscent of our usual routine following tea and lunch, and grab Lilly and Akira as we leave the bar. The beautiful music fades away as we start walking to Akira's car, parked a long way away in the city streets. Though I'm not so certain she's in a fit state to drive home...

"So, you enjoy yourselves?" she says, carefully managing to avoid slurring any of her words. Hisao and I both smile at this, and reply with a shared nod that we did. We both notice, however, Lilly looking a little concerned.

"Worried about the trip, Lilly?"

She sighs and pauses before answering Hisao's question. "A little. It means quite a bit." I'm slightly taken aback by the sudden hand that lands on Lilly's shoulder, despite it not affecting me in any way. As Akira tries to

provide some kind of support for her sister, I feel just confident enough to weigh in with my own words.

"You'll be okay, Lilly. I hope you can enjoy your time over there." Even if the reason for her going is hardly a cheery one.

"Thank you, Hanako. I'll try to." Lilly faces in my general direction and a soft smile appears on her face. "It will be nice to be back with my family, after all, no matter for how brief a time it may be." I can see a brief flash of something that seems to be approximating annoyance, or anger, on Akira's face, but she swiftly hides it and returns to the happy expression of before. I realise that she doesn't have quite the same feelings towards their parents as Lilly does, but I know better than to comment, especially given my own situation. Truth be told, I'm feeling a bit tired. It was nice though, to talk more to Hisao and to reveal a bit more of myself to him. As I discussed once with Miss Yumi, it will be a slow process, and it may never actually be complete, but certainly I can at least try.

Besides, there's so much more for me to tell Hisao about myself. Things that I can't bring myself to say today, but perhaps one day soon...

20. Act 3, Chapter 9: Roots Before Branches

Act 3 – Chapter Nine: Roots Before Branches

We gather the next day for Lilly and Akira's departure. "Right then," asks Hisao. "Are you taking the bus, Lilly?" We're standing in the corridor outside mine and Lilly's rooms, ready to see her off.

"I'll have to take this with me, so I've booked a taxi," she replies, gesturing pointedly at a large suitcase to one side, containing all her luggage for the trip. "It'll meet us at the school gates in about five minutes."

"Ah, I see." As Lilly feels for the handle and kneels down to pick up her case, Hisao moves forward to help. It's clear that the case is rather on the heavy side, I know I'd certainly have some trouble carrying it. "That is awfully kind of you, Hisao," comes the response from Lilly. He's acting every bit the consummate gentleman, and I can't help but consider he's falling back into the pattern I was hoping he wouldn't stick to. Maybe that's just who he is, though. It's not an unpleasant way for someone to be, I suppose, as long as I have my space and can get through things myself. Lilly is more than worthy of Hisao's help, but I can't claim the same for myself...

Before I get lost in my thoughts I hear Lilly's voice again. "Well, thank you then," she says to Hisao. "We should hurry though, if the taxi leaves then it will take quite a while to book a new one. Are you ready, Hanako?"

Her final comment is directed straight to me, and I reply in the affirmative. "Y-yeah. Let's go."

We hurry to the gates, hoping that the taxi hasn't yet arrived. As we approach, though, it seems Lilly's fears are unfounded. It's not yet here. Hisao takes a more light-hearted view of the situation, though. "Well, nothing like a bit of exercise in the morning. The nurse told me that I should be doing that."

I'm not sure whether to admonish him for taking such a loose approach to his health, especially whilst at Yamaku, or whether to agree that a bit of exercise is a good thing in the morning. I suppose the two aren't entirely incongruent. Lilly, however, is more firm in her opinion.

"I think he probably had other things in mind, Hisao. And probably with more regularity. Do you intend to be helping people with their luggage every day?"

She has a point. "I guess not," Hisao replies. "Looks like we've got a bit to wait anyway. How long should we wait for the taxi before calling them again?"

I'm not entirely sure why Akira couldn't have come here and picked Lilly up, regardless of my thoughts on her driving last night. Then again, it would be going out of her way quite a bit to make a detour to Yamaku, since she's much closer to the airport than we are. Plus, she might be nursing a hangover, or just be having a lie-in with the extra time afforded to her by way of travel distance. As I think about this, Lilly answers the question posed by Hisao.

"I would say another ten minutes, but they've never let me down before. There's probably just a little traffic."

"Okay then." We wait in silence for a few seconds before Hisao speaks again. "So how long is the flight to Scotland?" I realise it's a long journey, and will take a lot of time, but I'm not quite prepared for Lilly's answer. It seems amazingly far, and drives home just how great the distance will be between us. One less crutch to support me in my hardest moments. Both a blessing, and a curse.

"About sixteen hours, if I remember correctly." As I say, a very long time. "It's a bit hard to tell with the changing time zones."

"So long..." I hear myself say quietly. I'd forgotten about the time zones too, it'll make phoning each other a bit more awkward when it's night here and morning there. I keep running through my head just how I'll manage to cope

without Lilly here for me. I hate myself for it, but I depend on her, and although I don't feel I deserve the support she gives me I can't deny I'm grateful for it. That is, I'm grateful when I want it. I suppose it's a good thing that she's leaving just at the time when I want to shut the world out, when I want to be alone, but I can't avoid feeling tense and wanting to find some way to cope and wondering how Hisao will deal with everything and how I can keep him away and...

"Yeah, I can't imagine being on a plane for that long." Hisao brings me out of my reverie, though it does little to calm me down. I try and force my mind to think of other things, like how interesting it would be to fly somewhere. I've never been on a plane before, not that I remember at any rate. I understand the concept, but it doesn't make the idea of flying in a big metal box any less strange and surreal to me. Thinking about it, and listening to Lilly, helps me stay a little calmer, but it's still a concerted effort to maintain it.

"It's not too bad," she says. "I'll spend most of it either asleep or catching up on my English. I hardly use that here so I need to refamiliarise myself with it a little."

I try to hide my anxiety by getting a bit more involved in the discussion. "W-will your accent... be a problem?"

"I wouldn't worry about that too much. It may be an issue initially, but I should be fine once I get used to it."

With that, the conversation ends for now, and we all sit down to wait. With nothing to distract me I find my thoughts constantly returning to the coming days alone, and what I'll have to face yet again. Every year, haunted by old memories and the ghosts of the past. Even Lilly's determination each year to give me better memories and experiences are subdued by the strength of my hurt. Every time I find something else to concentrate on I can't avoid returning to the darker part of my mind. Maybe it's a bit masochistic of me, though I don't see how. I don't want these thoughts. Yet maybe I'm meant to suffer, maybe I'm not meant to be happy. I keep pushing the thoughts aside

and still they keep coming back. My fingernails are wearing down to stubs, not exactly pretty like Lilly, and I glance across at Hisao several times, only to hurriedly look away when I notice him watching me in return.

He opens his mouth as if to speak, when suddenly a very faint roaring sound appears on the edge of our hearing. It quickly rises in volume, until we see a lone car cresting the hill. "Ah, I think the taxi is on its way..."

"Well spotted, Hisao, I only just heard it as well." I think Lilly probably heard it a bit further back, actually, given her aptitude for her other senses in lieu of her sight. Then again, maybe she was as distracted as I was, by other matters entirely. Sometimes to keep my mind away from my own troubles, I try to imagine what Lilly thinks, what her emotions and feelings are. Why she decides to bother herself with someone like me.

Or, maybe, Hisao has just become that bit more aware of his surroundings. Maybe he's starting to sense things the way Lilly does, as if a little bit of her is rubbing off on him.

When the taxi stops and confirms Lilly's identity, we help her load her luggage into the trunk, as she sits gently on the back seat. She opens the window and we say our farewells. "Have a safe trip, Lilly," I say.

"Take care of yourself," says Hisao.

I try to avoid showing my emotions, but while I can easily (more so now than previously) hide the stammer, I can't prevent the sadness creeping in. Some things are just too hard.

"Of course I will," Lilly replies to our goodbyes and well wishes. "I'll be back before long, don't worry. There will still be another person here for you too, won't there, Hisao?" I know she names Hisao but her words are directed at me. It's like a reminder that no matter what happens, I won't be alone.

She still doesn't understand...

"Yeah, of course," comes Hisao's response. He turns to me and smiles, putting a hand on my shoulder. I look at his eyes, briefly, before turning my face away, hot and red as the blood rushes to my cheeks. I shiver just a little, though I don't think he can feel it. It's not an unpleasant feeling, nor a shiver of revulsion, more one of joy, though every fibre of my body is fighting the impulse to run and hide myself away, my sole defence mechanism. I'm torn between my heart, beating oh so fast, and my head, my tragically damaged mind constantly telling me I'm unworthy of feelings like these. I force myself to calm down, and return my gaze to Lilly, waiting in the taxi.

"See you, Lilly."

"Goodbye!"

Lilly responds to our words in kind, though not without a clear degree of sadness, and waves as the taxi finally pulls away down the hill. Hisao and I stand together, not speaking, just considering what to do. The next few weeks will be strange without Lilly's presence. I guess we'll just have to make the best of it.

As I ponder the rest of the day, Hisao asks me, "So, what do you want to do?"

"I... don't know." I have no idea what to say. I had no real plans, but maybe he can think of something...

21. Act 3, Chapter 10A: Dissonant Serenity

(The next chapter is forthcoming. Expect it within a couple of days.)

Act 3 – Chapter Ten, First Branch: Dissonant Serenity

"So, what do you want to do?"

Hisao's question catches me off guard. I answer as honestly as I can - "I... don't know." I pause, waiting his response, hoping against hope that maybe he'll...

"I don't know about you, but I think I'm going to try and take a nap. My head is killing me."

Oh.

I don't know what he thinks I'm feeling, but I can't speak. I honestly thought he might... No. I was stupid. I can't have ever really hoped that he would see me the way I see him...

I turn on my heel and walk away, as calmly as I can. Hisao comes with me and I try to keep my eyes as dry as possible. I won't let him see my tears. We stop outside the dormitories. "Well then, g-goodbye." I stop short, cutting off any more words that might escape from my parted lips.

"Do you want to have some tea or something, later? How about a game?"

How dare he? After what just happened, how dare he try and fix this so soon, and so abruptly? It's all I can do to keep my disappointment, my anger, my guilt, my embarrassment from shining through. I just want to part from him with no further ado and move forward. "I... I'm tired. Maybe tomorrow? I've got homework..."

Take the bait, please take it. Don't drag this out any longer. My heart is already breaking, don't force the wound to open wider. Please.

"Ah, homework. Thanks for reminding me; I've got a stack to do as well. I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

Maybe. "See you, Hisao." I don't give him a chance to reply, to hurt me any more than he already has. Maybe it would have been better if he'd never come to the library that day, if we'd never met. I turn again and continue walking, refusing to look back. Maybe tomorrow will be better. It definitely doesn't look like it, though.

22. Act 4, Chapter 1A: Nothing Left To Say

Act 4 – Chapter One, First Branch: Nothing Left To Say

I can't be there. I just can't.

We're one day away now, I'm one day away from it and I just can't be around anybody, but he's the last person I want to see. I never said anything to him about how I feel and I don't know now if that was a good thing or a bad one. Damn it all, I can't even bring myself to say his name. I put everything of myself on him, allowed myself to finally believe that for once, just once in my life I could rely on someone and finally let myself feel as if I deserved help. And whether or not he meant to, he threw it back in my face. I opened myself up to him and got absolutely nothing in return. Nothing. Just as he made me feel.

Just as I should feel.

Could I have ever really thought that I was worthy of the help and support that was being offered to me by those I thought of as friends? I like Yuuko, I like Akira, but I was never close to them, not really. Lilly may as well have abandoned me to fly across the world. I understand why she did it, and I forgive her, but I can never avoid that feeling of betrayal. Still, she isn't the one who hurt me. He came along and made me feel as if I could be worth something, as if I could finally stop rebutting every attempt made to help me. Then when we were finally alone he broke me into nothing but fragments, and made everything worse.

I'm supposed to see Miss Yumi today but I can't bring myself to go. I haven't felt so low since I... I don't want to go into it. I was a danger to myself then, in the most literal sense of the term, and I don't want to fall back into that pattern, something that I know will happen if I leave this room, this bed. I have to be strong, but it's so hard...

The pillow is stained and soaking wet. I alternate between waking and sleep. I can't be comfortable but I don't feel as if I deserve to be. I have to push him out of my mind, to undergo my usual ritual and wallow in my

own grief and self-loathing until all this passes and I can finally return to my semblance of normality. Even then, I know that I can't avoid the thoughts forcing their way into my head, of a life where he would be a part of it, such an important part that one day we... we...

I can't even cry now. I have water to sustain me, a lesson hard learned over years of mourning and misery, but even as I drink my body is purged and I cry again until whatever was taken in is completely gone. My mind races through so many possibilities of how and who and why. How I could have allowed myself to be taken in so deeply and so thoroughly, to fall for such a boy, such a man, and how I let myself lower all the defences I had spent so many years building even against the likes of Lilly. Who he could be, to let me trust him and then destroy that trust so cruelly. Why he would do this, and why I didn't see through him after everything else I've faced in my life so far.

I was blind. I realise the utter irony, but that's what I was. I was so in awe of the new and strange feelings that I didn't consider all sides to the story, and now it's too late.

Does he even care? I can't imagine he does. My life means nothing to someone like him.

As it should be. Why should I deserve to be treated like a person? Why should anybody see me as more than I am, as someone to respect, or talk to, or laugh with? Or love?

I don't know how long I lie there, fighting the impulse to drift away into the land of nightmares, so much worse than they have ever been before. Last night I saw him merged into the usual dreams, waiting as I watched my family burn. Never speaking, not even looking at me, just watching the destruction and the carnage as my life fell apart for the first, but nowhere near last, time.

My thoughts are everywhere and I can't even maintain my own consistency. Did he know how much I would break, like one of the fragile dolls on my shelf, when he said those words to me yesterday? It would have been

nothing, no effort at all, to at least spend some time with me! Instead he callously left me to my own devices, expecting me to be at his beck and call yet showing no sign of interest in my own wants or desires, however few they may be. When Lilly bought me that doll for the day I dread, she couldn't have known just how much my life would come to resemble the gift.

Fragile.

They say that in many fragile things there is a level of strength, but whatever strength I had has been sucked away by him. I can't eat, I can't sleep, though I can't stay awake, and whatever I do I find myself reminded of him.

It's not even that I wanted the support that he was originally offering. I don't want that, I don't need it. Help, people doing everything for me and smothering me like some kind of needy child, that's never been what I wanted! But surely everyone needs some kind of company, someone to share their darkest secrets with, someone who can be a crutch when needed yet never expects that their help is vital. Lilly was never that for me. She tried, oh yes, but she couldn't be there all the time when I needed her, and she was there too much when I didn't, when I was trying to show my inner strength.

I still have that. I know it, I just buried it so far down that I don't know if I could recover it again. Maybe in my darkest moments, because this isn't my darkest moment, not by a long shot. It's been a long time since I felt this low, but I know that I can go even lower. As for the trigger, well, I won't know that until it hits me.

I realise I wasn't lying to him when I mentioned my homework yesterday. I don't have any drive now to finish it. It will have to wait, indefinitely. The day passes. Nothing happens save my ongoing hatred of the world, and one small part of it in particular.

Can I really blame him, though? I'm tough to deal with, I know that. Some people come with baggage, but who else has dealt with the kind of thing I

have had to live with most of my life? If he was scared off by that, if he considered all the possibilities and decided it wasn't worth the trauma or the stress... but then he could have been honest! I'd have understood. Did he ever even consider how I might have felt about him? Or are his thoughts elsewhere, perhaps halfway across the world, with someone else...?

I'm startled from my reverie by a gentle knocking on the door. No, please, don't let it be...

Knock. Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Hanako, it's just me. Mutou said to give you some stuff." No. I didn't want this, I didn't want this! However, if he's been sent here by Mutou-sensei then I have little choice. I wait as long as I can before emerging from the damp cocoon and checking that my nightgown covers everything. I slowly walk towards the door and unlock it, opening it just a fraction so I can see his face through the gap. I don't look at his eyes, in fact I deliberately avoid his gaze. I don't want to know what he might be thinking now.

"Hi, Hanako. Mutou wanted me to give you these since you weren't in class today." My shoulders slumped, I take the papers from his outstretched hand, barely glancing at them before my own hand moves away. I already know that this work won't be done for a while, I have no mood nor desire to study right now. He moves his head to look at me better but I look away, not wanting him to see me like this.

How pathetic of me, to still care what he thinks of me, of my appearance, after everything I've been through...

"Are you... okay? If you're feeling sick or anything, I could go get a nurse." This is the first time I look at him, the first time I can bring myself to say how I feel.

"I'm fine." The lie is so obvious but he doesn't question it. I honestly don't know if I even want him to, or if I'd rather he leave. At least he isn't trying to get into the room, to comfort me like some kind of hypocrite.

"I see." He accepts my words without question. Then... "Would you like me to stay? I don't have anything urgent to do at the moment, so it wouldn't be any trouble."

I look away again, determined not to let him see my eyes any more.

"Hanako...?" I shake my head, the only response I dare give. I dread to imagine what words will burst from my lips if I open them, I can already feel them wobbling. "Okay. Um... good night, then." I close the door before he can continue speaking, and retreat to my bed. I remove the nightgown and try to sleep, dreading the dreams to come.

I wonder if he can dream well...?

23. Act 4, Chapter 2A: To Restart?

Act 4 – Chapter Two, First Branch: What Must We Do To Restart?

Not for the first time, and certainly not for the last, I wonder how everyone would get along if I were to just disappear. As if I'd never existed, which wouldn't be too far wrong for a lot of people at this damn school. My door is locked, my pillow stained with tears that refuse to fall any more. My heart has broken over and over again and I can't avoid thinking about the irony, no matter how much I desperately want to withhold from keeping him in my head. My only ally has abandoned me, and even then she would be of little use. Everyone who tries to help me just wants to use me, either for their career or their own sense of self worth and importance, or some foolish romantic notion that they can make me better when really all they're serving is their own selfish need to appear good, to appear as though they care about those less fortunate than they are. It makes me sick but I can't even bring myself to do that, my body is so empty. Of food, of water, of feeling, of caring.

I have nothing left.

The door knocks, and I turn away. Is he really here, today of all days? Has he really stooped so low as to disturb my peace, the only peace I've had for days or weeks or ever since my life went so far downhill, and to try and 'fix' me? I can't imagine what must be going through his mind as I ignore his overture so pointedly and so deliberately.

The knocking continues briefly then stops. He tries the door, no luck. Can he not get a hint? A voice calls out, one that I grew to love, once. One that I've now grown to dread.

"Hanako..."

He pauses. Maybe he knows that I'm shutting him out, and the world with him, but he doesn't give a damn. He keeps trying, though surely he must know the pain it's causing? Nothing but a selfish desire to make me better, as if I need to be fixed, like I'm some broken doll that's so close to breaking

apart and shattering into a thousand ceramic splinters. Her 'gift' is a stark contrast to how they make me feel.

"Um..." the hateful sound continues. "I don't know if you can hear me, but..." A pause. "I just want to talk to you a bit. If you can hear me, could you unlock the door?"

I drag it out for as long as I can, knowing that his stubbornness will force his victory, but willing to show I can be as stone too. Our games of chess are forgotten, the aspects of our nature laid bare despite the too-thin panel of timber between us. After minutes have passed, seeming like hours, I finally pick one leg up and swing it out of bed. I don my nightgown slowly, no longer caring about my modesty but refusing to show him my scars, both outwardly and inwardly.

I finally turn the bolt and remove my last vestige of security, knowing that I'll regret this but unable to force the problem away any more. Am I really so naive, so self destructive, that I'll go through this again? Am I so pathetic that despite everything I still want to see his face, to hear his voice and to try and reclaim what might have been (but which I know could never have, would only have driven me further into my despair as the betrayal would have hurt me so much more)? Even when my mind is telling me no, is begging me to hold and to keep him away, my heart is telling me yes, and the irony hits home yet again.

As I play with the lock, still fighting with myself to make a choice, unwilling to open (and secretly hoping it will break, trapping me away from him), he speaks again through the wood. "I... I don't really know what to say, but... I just wanted to see you. I wanted to make sure you're alright."

That's the breaking point, the words that make me want to refuse entry once and for all. It's too late, however. I've already stepped back and sat down; the handle is already turning, the door opening and a further feeling of dread creeping over me as I ponder what new mistake I've now made.

He crosses the threshold and I look away, refusing to meet his eye. We stay like that for a moment, too brief to my mind, until eventually he catches

mine and I quickly rise on bare feet to face him directly.

"Wh-what are you...?" I meet his daring with a mix of anger and the sorrow I still feel, present still even as my tears refuse to show. Let him explain himself, if he even cares enough to. If he can bring himself to show me the respect that I so desperately crave yet can't ever bring myself to ask for...

"I... I just wanted to check that you were all right. I thought it would be okay, since you unlocked the door."

I open my mouth then close it, not feeling confident enough to make the retort I want. I unlocked it, yes, and maybe I knew that he would take it as an invitation of entry. It still didn't give him the right to just walk in. A sign of arrogance, or lack of empathy, another display of just how little he really cares, despite his protestations to the contrary.

What am I really thinking? My mind is all over the place, a jumbled mess of contradictions. I can barely hold it together, I know that soon I'll be at the breaking point.

I look down, and in the corner of my eye I see him walking towards the desk, slowly, deliberately. He keeps his eyes fixed on me, as he sits down carefully on the single chair. I wait for him to speak; I'm not kept for long.

"Want to go out somewhere? Going down the hill to town might be a bit much, but we could at least go for a walk outside."

I can't understand his intentions, save that he seems fixed on getting me to act normally, to act as if I don't have any kind of problem. He's still trying to repair the broken facade, not realising it's much deeper than that. "Why... do you want to do that?"

"I was just thinking that it might help you a bit. You spend so much time inside, your skin's going to get as pale as Lilly's before long." I was right then, he still thinks I need his help to be made better. He laughs a little, more a snort than anything remotely attractive, which I refuse to reciprocate, staring down again.

"If you don't want to go..." I start, "I-I don't want to go either." My former feelings towards him, still plainly evident. I try my very best to push them down, to smother anything I felt for him in the layers of despair currently engulfing me.

I still refuse to let the tears show.

He doesn't give up. "It's fine. I played soccer and hung out with friends after school a lot before coming to Yamaku, so I like being outdoors." My silence is all I give him, though it seems like he's slightly rubbing it in, that socially speaking he had so much when I've always had so little. "We could go to the library... uh, if it wasn't closed by about now. The gardens would be fine, though."

I try and distract myself from the worst of the thoughts that are threatening to rise up inside me, and start to fiddle with my hair. He looks strangely at me, then leans forward with a smile. I can't see what there is to smile about though.

"There wouldn't be anyone around by now, so you wouldn't have to worry about someone getting in our way. It could be a little date or something."

He laughs again, a softer one this time, but his words have shocked me. I grip the bed as tightly as I can and it's all I can do to stop a gasp or a small cry of frustration from emerging. I start to speak under my breath, but I can barely understand what words are forming, the disconnection between the parts of my mind is so severe.

"Hanako?"

"You... don't understand..." He has no idea how I felt, how much I would have wanted that, if only he'd done it when the time mattered, when it was right. If only he'd understood just how badly I wanted this, and how much he hurt me when he refused before. How much I hate myself for still wanting it despite the betrayal.

"I told you, it's fine. It's just a little walk, nobody'll notice us." He gets up and walks to the door, turning his head to me. I wish he was leaving completely, but as he looks at me I know the intention is for me to follow.

"I don't..."

He cuts me off before I can finish my half-formed sentence. "Going outside for a bit is good for clearing your head." He's pushing further and further, reaching those boundaries that will eventually make me break...

"Why do you... want to do this..."

"Because I want to help you." Didn't I make myself clear in all the times we've been together like this? Evidently not, but then I already know that. My key failing, and now it's come down to a confrontation I really don't want.

"I don't... want... help." I answer him shakily. "Did you just come here... to try and get me out...?" I already know the answer.

"I don't mind. I think everyone needs help sometimes. When I was trying to get through my first days at Yamaku, you and Lilly helped me a lot." He doesn't understand, he doesn't have any idea how much this hurts. He doesn't care that our circumstances are so different, that he has never had to suffer the way I have suffered, and I find myself right on the very edge. "Besides," he goes on, "I'm not exactly busy."

"I don't w-want to go. I'm... fine." I know he won't believe a word but I need him to understand!

"I don't really think it's healthy to stay indoors that long. The sun's still got a little life in it, so it's not too late to have at least a little walk. I could probably use a little exercise anyway, to help wake me up. I've got some homework to get done, and it wouldn't be good to fall asleep halfway through doing it."

"Then... go." I finally give him a direct order to leave. If he has homework then surely that's more important than coming here trying to force his way into my life, trying to force a recovery that I don't want from him.

He doesn't listen. "By myself?" I nod curtly, just once. "Well," he replies, "I'm not really against that, but... are you sure? I swung by to invite you to come with me." An invitation that you made, and that I refused. Surely so clear an answer can be followed without issue?

"I'm fine. You can go." I try to force a degree of serenity into my voice, to remain calm despite how close I am now to breaking point.

"Come on, just a small walk." He perseveres.

"Please, just go. I-I'm fine here." The stammer returns and I feel the cracks showing. Surely he knows how hard this is?

"...Hanako?" My face is just a stone slab, I know that a single movement will be the final straw and that I won't be able to hold any of it in any longer. "Well, if you want to stay here... maybe we could play a game?"

I keep telling him and he keeps pushing, keeps refusing to take the most obvious clues and even the direct commands, no matter how many times I repeat them. Does he expect me to just change my mind and decide to succumb, bending to his will like a leaf on the wind, as if I have no feelings nor strengths of my own? They're rising higher and higher, forcing against my natural instincts to hide away, just waiting to finally burst... "Just leave. Please. I don't... want to do anything right now."

"Surely there's something you want to do. It must be boring, sitting here in your room alone."

I tell him yet again what I want. "I want you to go."

"Come on, you don't have to be like that. I just want to spend some time with you. Lilly and I are worried, so..." I stiffen even more, as if that were possible, at her name. They're both involved in this?

"You... talked to her?" Yet another betrayal!

He finally seems to stumble, but only a little. "Uh... yeah. We were... on the phone, just a little while ago. We're both really worried about you."

Just leave, go away, let me be alone, just go, just go, just go, just go please just fuck off Hisao!

"Hanako...?"

"I'm telling you... please, go away. You don't understand anything..."

He tries again, heeding absolutely nothing. "If we just had a talk, you could tell me what I don't understand. I just want to protect you, I don't really see..." That's it, you don't understand because you won't listen when I tell you, you just hide it inside a corner of your mind and disregard it as everyone else disregards me and I'm sick of it! I try to keep calm but it's becoming harder and harder and my thoughts constantly betray my emotions...

"Get... out, p-please..." A broken record. Broken.

"Just locking yourself in your room again isn't going to help anything, Hanako. Please..." Just listen to me for once!

There's another silent moment, broken yet again by constant pleading. "Hanako, I just want to help you..."

I can't take this any more! Before I know what I'm doing I rise to my bare feet and finally look him in the eyes. "Get out of my room, get out of my room, get out of my room...!" He stands stunned, not a single sound escaping from his lips. His feet remain where they are, he still can't get the damn message even now! "Leave! I'm telling you, go!"

"B-but... I was just trying to... help you..." His voice is quieter but I just don't care anymore, I don't care I just want him gone, he will never

understand and he will never feel anything for me but pity and I just cannot take this any more, I need him to go, to leave me now and forever!

"I know I need help! I know I'm broken! I don't need you to tell me that!" As I continue with the full force of my pent up frustrations, finally given an outlet, I realise at least part of that is a lie, but by now I just don't care any more.

"I never said you were broken, or anything like that!"

"It's written on your face, it's written on Lilly's face, it's written on everybody's faces!" I continue on unable to stop, but by now I don't want to. He never understood when I tried to explain, he never gave a single damn when I wanted to actually spend time with him, now he feels as if he can just decide when and what I do with him, it's his turn to feel worthless, to feel small, to know that life is not perfect!

"I see a therapist every week, Lilly dotes on me as if I were her child, and now... even you! Nothing's changed, nothing at all! I hate Lilly, and I... I hate you more than anyone...!" As the words leave my mouth I know I can't take them back, nor do I want to. I finally feel free to say and do what I want, as if I matter, though I know it's come at such a high cost.

I don't care.

"Go! Leave me alone! Get out of here!" He finally gets the hint, and slowly edges back, keeping his eyes fixed on mine, step by step until he finally reaches the door. His hand touches the handle and opens it, as he gives me one final look before he leaves. I don't want him here again. I don't want to see him again, nor Lilly. I hope they're happy.

I know I'm not.

As the futility of everything comes into focus, as I realise how far things have come, I lie back on the bed and close my eyes. I want the tears to come but there's nothing left, I can't even muster the energy to cry. I'm utterly spent. We are broken.

The nightmares come again, and for the first time, I embrace them. I know in my heart, my empty, fragile heart, that the first time won't be the last.

24. Act 3, Chapter 10B: Summer In The City

Act 3 – Chapter Ten, Second Branch: Summer In The City

"So, what do you want to do?" His question catches me slightly off guard.

"I... don't know." My plans today were to see Lilly off, then sit in my room and do some homework, then read. I didn't think of anything else to do, I had no desire until now to consider doing anything else. With Hisao, however... assuming he does want to do anything with me, that is. I hope so, I hope for it so much...

"Do you want to head into town and look for a bookshop or something? We have the rest of the day free." He pauses, as if he's not so certain of asking me, as if he thinks I might refuse...

"Okay." Yes, oh yes this is perfect, more than I could have hoped for.

"Really?"

"R-really. Let's go." I feel a bit annoyed at him for second guessing me, as if I might suddenly change my mind, but I suppose where I'm concerned it's understandable. He gives me a puzzled look and I can't avoid the thought that he simply doesn't understand why I agreed so readily, but as we wait for the bus into town he doesn't question my decision.

We aren't kept waiting too long and the bus ride is pleasant enough. The countryside is pretty, and it's not very far from the small town at the foot of the hill to the city just on the other side. The bus isn't very crowded either, though I can't say the same for the streets when we arrive. I knew it would be like this though, and if I have any problems coping then I only have myself to blame. I can't blame Hisao, not for agreeing to spend time with me like this, without imposing and forcing his way in. What would I have done if he had tried to force himself into my life? I can't even begin to imagine.

We step off the bus and the immediacy of the crowd hits me, all at once. My first instinct is to retreat and hide myself away, but I have to be strong. I settle for holding closely to Hisao, which I'll admit does have its benefits... a young woman clutching the arm of a young man, a rather attractive and nice young man at that... nevertheless my hat still hides my face, keeping hidden the worst of the scars. Not having to deal with the stares would be much better than succumbing to them.

"So, uh, where shall we go? A bookshop?" He gives me the choice of deciding where to haunt, but I don't know the city very well. It's exceptionally rare that I come here, and the night at the jazz bar was the first in a long time. I have no better ideas, so I nod my head. It takes a while for Hisao to notice, however.

"O-okay. D-do you know of one?"

"Actually, I do. We passed a few when Lilly and I were looking for your presents..." He breaks off suddenly. I know exactly why, it's the same reason why I look down for a second and show a hint of a frown on my face. I think I can deal with it while he's here, but not mentioning it would be much easier for me.

As he notices his error, I wait for him to continue, but when the silence between us is more than a few seconds old I decide to break it. "You both... spent a lot of time?" I don't move away from the topic at hand, but I don't know why. Perhaps it's another sign of how I'm growing, how I can cope more when he's around, when he's treating me as a human being. However much I deserve it, or however little, I feel happier and better about myself when he's with me. In any case, I want him to know that he doesn't need to tiptoe on eggshells all the time.

"We wanted to make sure we got the right present, after all," he continues. I think he knows that the topic is okay again. I smile and blush, I can't help myself. After so long feeling so worthless it's nice to know that somebody truly values me, enough to go out of their way to make me happy. It's amazing that just a few days or weeks ago, I would have thought they were

wasting their time, but now I can see that I really am treasured, at least in some small way.

Hisao carries on speaking as we both smile at each other. "Anyway, there should be a bookshop just up ahead, do you want to check it out?"

"S-sure." We walk again, and I feel confident enough to lean across to Hisao and clutch his arm with my other, so now I'm holding on with both of my own. From the outside I suppose it could look more like a defensive gesture, and in a way it is. I still feel overwhelmed by the people surrounding us, but it's also a sign of affection, at least in my mind. I feel safe enough with Hisao that I can let him protect me, when I want to be protected. As long as I still have my space when I need it.

We don't talk for a while as we walk, but when we get nearer to the bookshop Hisao had mentioned, he asks me a question, seemingly from out of the blue. "I was wondering, Hanako... have you thought yet about when you're going to learn to drive?"

His question surprises me, and I can't help but wonder why he wants to know something like that? "D-driving?"

"Yeah. You're kind of lucky, in a way; there aren't a whole lot of students in Yamaku that are allowed to drive." I don't answer, I'm too busy trying to understand what he means, and why he asked in the first place. Maybe he just wants to distract me from the crowd. He has a point, my condition is much more manageable in a physical sense (if not a psychological one) than most of our fellow students. Lilly certainly couldn't drive, and I think of Rin Tezuka, who wouldn't exactly be able to steer a car. I suppose Emi Ibarazaki might, though I'm not so clear on the legal side of driving with a disability. I wonder if Hisao would be allowed to learn? On the one hand, he has the physical capability, and could presumably take controlled lessons with no problems. On the other, what if he were to have a heart attack while on the road? What if he was in a road rage incident, and it triggered his condition?

By the time I finish running down the rabbit-holes of my mind in search of a conclusion to my thoughts of driving, we are standing outside a bookshop.

A closed bookshop, no less. I see that Hisao shares my opinion on this turn of events... "What kind of self-respecting bookshop closes on Saturdays?" That being said, though I have the same opinion, I can also think of a very good reason for this.

"Bookshops... don't make much money anymore, because of the Internet. Maybe they just had to close over weekends?"

Hisao looks at me, and nods in agreement. "Huh, I guess that makes sense... it's easier to find books online. Anyway, it looks like this idea is shot. Anything else you'd like to do?"

There is one thing, though I didn't want to say anything before... "I-if it's not... not a bother... could you show me where you bought my present?" I smile, though I can feel the nervous stammer creeping its way in. I'll admit, I am certainly curious to find out where he and Lilly went that day, to find such a cute gift.

"Sure, not a problem. It's not far from here." We continue walking in the same direction, turning down a few side streets and getting nearly lost in a maze of pedestrianised roads and small stores that sell all kinds of things. A chocolate shop on one side, books on another (also closed), a couple of bars with businessmen singing karaoke (this early in the day?). I spot the same jazz bar we visited before in another street, though it's one that we don't walk down. I'm half certain that Hisao doesn't even know where he's going, until we stop suddenly outside a tiny shop with a number of old chairs, dolls, clocks and other aged items in the window.

"Here we are, Othello's Antiques." I wonder to myself if the name has any relation to the Shakespearian character (I may not know very much English, but I can certainly say I have a fond appreciation for the translated works of the bard himself). I can't imagine how.

"I-it's small."

"Well, yes," comes the reply. "It took Lilly and I some time to find it."

"Can we go in?" Now that we're here I have a longing to see just what else this cave of curiosities holds.

"I don't see why not; it's open." I step forward and push the door open, Hisao following behind. I'm not so sure if there are ever many customers here, it seems pretty quiet. In fact, he and I are the only people here, save for the store's owner, who comes walking across as he hears the bell ring. The owner is a bearded man, around middle age or possibly a bit older, going grey. He reminds me a little of a museum curator. He barely glances at me, though my hat is slightly down again, immediately noticing Hisao. I take it he remembers seeing Hisao with Lilly, as he looks slightly forlorn.

"Oh, you're not here for a return, are you?" He probably can't afford to give many refunds with such a small shop and such an apparently low level of clientele. "Wait, that's not the girl you had with you last time..."

"Er, no, we're not here to return anything. We were just in town and wanted to have another look in here." There's a pause as the store owner thinks about Hisao's words. Customers seem rare enough here, two high school students must be a once in a blue moon occurrence. He soon breaks the silence.

"Might this be the friend you bought gifts for?"

"That's right. They were presents for her." Upon hearing Hisao's words, the store owner turns to me, and views at me properly for the first time. I freeze, for I can clearly see, and recognise, the look on his face.

It's one that I'm sadly used to. A mixture of pity and revulsion. I wonder if there's anywhere in the world that people like me can live without prejudice, without being looked down upon like second class citizens? Japan has such a well known and well respected culture, based upon honour, but nobody ever thinks about its ugly side. Honour is everything, and someone like me, or like Hisao, someone different, can never be equal. Yamaku is lauded as a place where we can be prepared for society on an equal level, where young people who happen to be disabled in some way can have a normal life until we're flung out to fend for ourselves. It never

gets easier, though. It's easier for those like Hisao, who aren't marked so clearly by their weaknesses, but for someone like me? No matter where I go, no matter how strong I may try and be (even if I don't really feel it), I'm faced with this. I'm considered without honour for having these scars, or for not having arms, or legs, or for being blind or deaf or dumb. Lilly sometimes tells me of her uncle, Shizune's father, and how he reacted at finding out not one, but two members of his family were impure, were not perfect. People question why I appear so weak, but is it any wonder when even the most mild mannered citizen will treat me like nothing at all for simply daring (in their mind) to look different?

To the store owner's credit, he doesn't shy away, nor refuse to acknowledge me like others do. Neither does he stare, again like some I could mention. Instead, he looks slightly away, to the side of us both, though I notice his body is tense and his face clearly shows an awkward expression. I wonder how he reacted when he saw Lilly, when she bought me the doll, and noticed her blindness?

I recall my first meeting with Hisao, and remember that he had much the same look, acted in much the same way, when we first spoke. Or rather, when he first spoke, and I ran away. So it's hard for me to be too angry at the store owner today. "You're lucky there, young lady. To have friends that care about you as much as they do."

I can't be upset, not now. There are many who would have refused to notice me, refused to accept my existence. He may have reacted in the same way at first, and may be struggling to accept my scars, but he's made some effort, and I can see how tough it must be to overcome years of prejudice (especially for an older gentleman like him). His words are sincere. "Thank you..."

I walk throughout the store, hoping that maybe the air will clear if given a chance. I look at all the items on display, antiques and bric-a-brac that I know I can't afford but nevertheless admire. I find the dolls and can see several that look very similar to the one Lilly bought me, although not a single one is exactly the same. Each doll unique, just like I am. Just like

Hisao, like Lilly, Akira, and all the other people in my life who have helped me, supported me, and made me the person I am. Sometimes, maybe it's a bit much, and I don't always need the help (a little overdone and overwrought by Lilly especially), but I think to myself how grateful I am to have them all there for me during the times I really need them. And how grateful I am to Hisao for suggesting this little trip. "This is a nice shop."

"Yeah," says Hisao, "it's not what I expected. Do you want to buy something?"

I wish I could, but I can't ask that of Hisao. "I-I didn't bring any money."

"Well, we can always come again."

"W-we can?" If we can still find it, though I have some faith now (at least, more so than earlier) in Hisao's skills as a human GPS.

"Of course. We can come here as often as you'd like."

I can't tell him how happy I am to hear that, there aren't words for it. I settle on a simple, stammered, "th-thank you."

"You don't need to thank me; I almost forgot where this place was."

I've enjoyed the day, but I think it's probably time to finish this impromptu... well, I can't really call it a 'date'. Can I? "C-can we go back to the school now?"

"Sure thing. Let's go." We say goodbye to the store owner, and he mumbles a goodbye in return. I see he's still struggling with my presence, but although he never looks at me I can tell from his voice that his goodbye was meant as a pleasant and peaceful wish. We start to walk back up the street, heading towards the bus stop back to Yamaku, when I notice in the corner of my eye Hisao turn his head, to look back towards the store. I don't turn my own head to follow suit, I feel that bit too self conscious to do so. I can't help but wonder, though without any grounding I suppose, what he was looking at...?

We barely speak on the way back, but the silence isn't a bad one. I think Hisao might have been more affected than I was by the look the store owner originally gave me, but what he doesn't realise is that I'm used to that kind of thing. It's new to him, and something that he'll have to deal with a lot less, with his condition being so much easier to hide from people. We're both lost in our own thoughts, whether good or bad, and even as we don't speak we both know there's not much need to. I had fun, and I hope Hisao did too.

Eventually we're standing, alone together, on the steps in front of the dormitories of Yamaku. "Well then," I say, "goodbye."

"Do you want to have some tea or something? How about a game?" I'm a little embarrassed, but I have to refuse. It's not that I don't want to, but rather that I need to have some alone time now, and I still have work to do. I've enjoyed myself, spending time with Hisao, but too much time together and we stand to lose what makes it so special.

"I... I'm tired. Maybe later? I've got homework..." The disappointment I feel leaks through my words, and on Hisao's face is a sort of half smile that's tinged with sadness.

"Ah, homework. Thanks for reminding me, I've got a stack to do as well." Lazy! "I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you, Hisao." I turn and walk away, though not without a genuine smile, and head back to the female dormitories, ready to start my work. I look forward to seeing him again soon enough.

Even so, there is something I'm a little worried about. I don't know if Hisao is aware, but tomorrow is the day before my... my birthday. I doubt I'll be in class tomorrow, and probably not for a few days afterwards either. My faith in him is more pronounced, and I hope he'll at least visit, but if he does he risks seeing me at my worst. Could I really face letting him see me like that? In another world, another time, I might be distrustful of him, maybe I wouldn't want him to be there, trying to help me and support me when I clearly don't deserve it. After today, however, I can see that he does care for

me, even if it's only as a friend at this point, and he's been willing now to give me my space without complaint even after we've spent so much time in each other's company. I hope I can trust him to give me that space if I need it, and to be there if I want him to be. As for how our friendship, our relationship, develops from here? I'll have to wait and see...

25. Act 4, Chapter 1B: Knight to D4

Act 4 – Chapter One, Second Branch: Knight to D4

My tears stain the pillow, my gown is damp from crying. I thought today would be better, but in some ways it's only ended up worse. To finally find someone who I can trust, who I can be honest with, only for my emotions to get in the way before I can truly give him that honesty. I didn't have the nightmares but even now I can't bring myself to stop the flow of liquid dripping down my face. I enjoyed my time with Hisao so much yesterday, I thought that maybe I could finally move forward, finally start to put my past behind me.

I was naive to think it would be so easy.

As I weep, alone in an empty bed, I hear a knock on the door. I know exactly who it is, I can't avoid it. I don't want him to see me like this! Not after the happy times we shared together yesterday, and all those times before. I can't bear to let him see me in this state. I try desperately to stop the flow as the knocking continues, louder this time. " Hanako, it's just me. Mutou said to give you some stuff."

I can't ignore him. As much as I may want to, I just can't do it. He's been so good to me recently, and if I'm going to trust him then I know he'll have to see me in this way before we can make any further progress. Even so, I wipe the last of the tears from my face, the sleeves of my pink gown becoming ever so slightly more wet, and make my way towards the door. I walk slowly, reluctantly, hoping in the back of my mind that when I finally open the door he'll have already left. My eyes are fixed on the floor, expecting to see a set of papers pushed underneath. No such luck.

I reach the door and fiddle with the handle. As I open it I make sure to only let a crack of light shine through, as if to say I don't want Hisao here right now. As ever, he doesn't take the hint, though I guess I should be used to that by now. It's one of the things I like about him so much, and at the same time, one of the most infuriating.

"Hi, Hanako. Mutou wanted me to give you these since you weren't in class today." He holds out a stack of papers, assignments which I take in hand. My arm drops to my side and I try to avoid meeting his eye. I don't want him to notice the red marks where I've been rubbing my own, or how tired I really am. I just hope that he leaves without question, but in my heart I know he'll stay, if only to make sure I'm alright. "Are you... okay? If you're feeling sick or anything, I could go get a nurse."

I'm grateful, and I finally turn my eyes towards his, though only for a second. I'd be better off on my own, but the gesture is welcome. "I'm fine," I reply. We wait in silence for a moment. I'm able to look at him properly now, and as I do I notice his eyes point downwards, towards my sleeves and the cuffs of my gown. He can see the stains, and he looks up at my face as I turn away again. What must he be thinking?

"I see." He gives me no clues with his reply. Another pause, then he speaks again, and his reason for lingering becomes clear. "Would you like me to stay? I don't have anything urgent to do at the moment, so it wouldn't be any trouble."

I look away again, at the wall opposite, and downwards. I should have known Hisao would try to stay, to be here with me, and at any other time I would have said yes. I did say yes, when we went to the city, and it was wonderful. But this is a time for me to be alone, and I can't drag him into my own misery. It wouldn't be fair, nor right. "Hanako?" he presses me to reply. I respond with a shake of my head, albeit with mild regret.

"Okay," he says. "Um... good night, then." He waits, and I close the door without another word. I feel bad to send him away so abruptly, but it's for the best. In any case, I'm glad. He took it better than I thought he would, and I can hope now that we have some kind of understanding. At the same time, I hope I don't see him again for the next couple of days. I can't trust myself to not send him away again. No matter how much I may want to see him.

I can't keep on like this! I keep contradicting myself at every turn, speaking in paradoxes and wishing for the joy of love, of friendship, yet pushing it away every time. It's hard, and as I fall asleep I know I'll not rest tonight, fearing the nightmares that always plague me. It's worse at this time of year. No, I don't want him there tomorrow. Yet if he does come, I won't fight it. I won't fight him. At least as friends we can be together, although we may never push forward and progress our relationship if he does. If he can give me the space I need then maybe, just maybe, what I want will finally occur. If not, then we'll just have to settle for less. When I have the strength I'll return to class, and return to him, but until then... we'll just have to see...

26. Act 4, Chapter 2B: Too Close To The Sun

Act 4 – Chapter Two, Second Branch: Flying Too Close To The Sun

Today is no worse than any other. I'm shocked in a way, though I can barely register it. Maybe the past few days had some kind of calming influence, after all. My tears from yesterday have not returned, but that could be because I've had so little to drink so far. I haven't left the room, whatever food was hidden away becoming my only sustenance. In truth, I'm more exhausted than anything. I've tried to sleep, but in a strange paradox I found myself unable to rest. My body is fighting itself to nod off, but my mind is telling me to stay awake, and I have to go with what my mind tells me.

I've decided that if Hisao comes today, I won't fight him. I'll admit, I'd rather he stay away, just so that I can avoid him seeing me at my worst, which I realise is a rather selfish way to look at things. I don't care. If I can put it off for just a short while, another year perhaps, then it would be worth it. But if he does try to visit, then I'll allow it, and in a way I could do with the company. At least I know that I have friends, however much I try to push them away. It's hard, and maybe I don't deserve them. Or maybe I do, and maybe I'm being too hard on myself. It's difficult to get out of that mentality even now. I've gone so long feeling worthless that times like these, finally moving forward, become surreal moments where I'm no longer sure of how to progress. My routine has always been to close myself away, and Hisao has ripped that apart without me even realising. He's pushed his way into my life and now I don't know what I would do without him.

I haven't spoken to Miss Yumi for a while. We've touched on matters in our therapy sessions, but I feel as if I have to do this myself. Our meetings have taken a break now while I get through my... (I know I can do this...) my birthday. Any other therapist would say this is an ideal time to talk through my problems, to try and make some motion forwards, but Miss Yumi knows me well enough that she suggested the pause. The last time a therapist tried to hold a meeting with me at this time of the year, I regressed back to six months before, and all the progress we'd made in that time was lost.

Maybe I'm a lost cause. Maybe I'll never get better. But for now at least, I can finally allow myself to think differently. To think that I may be worth something after all, and that my own dreams and wishes are valued in some small way.

I consider sending an email to Lilly, but again I can't bring myself to do it. I certainly can't imagine phoning her. I don't know what the time is in Scotland, and I doubt I could afford the charge for an international call anyway. In any case, being able to allow Hisao here, however tentatively it may be, is a far cry from picking up the phone and taking the initiative. I could go to class but again I don't feel up to it. The questions, the stares, and everything that would come with such a bold move... again, I know I'd do nothing but regress once more. Being able to face just one person would be an achievement, as far as I'm concerned. If it has to be anyone, I'd want it to be Hisao.

I realise I'm talking in circles again. My mind is confused and my thoughts are going nowhere, on the one hand hoping Hisao comes and visits me and on the other wishing that he would stay away. I have to make my mind up for once!

No. I don't want him here. That's the final word. If he does come I'll be grateful, I'll welcome him, and I'll appreciate the gesture, but I'll know then that we can never be together. Not in the way I want. I need space to grieve, to mourn, and to wallow in my self-misery, if only as penance. If he doesn't come, then I can approach him tomorrow, when I have the strength, with hope in my heart and see how he reacts. To finally be certain if he does care, and simply wishes to give me the space I need, or if he had no intention of being here at all for me. Those are my options. As I consider them, and wonder how the day will turn out, I rest my head on the pillow and try to get some sleep, however minimal it may be.

I'm awakened by a knock on the door. I don't know how long it's been since I finally dozed off, but I know who it is. He came after all.

"Evening, Hanako. It's just me." I wait to see if he'll leave, but he stays put as I hear his voice once more through the door. "I... I have some food for the both of us. Could I come in?"

I consider refusing, but the offer he's made is too tempting to resist. It's nice of him. I really do appreciate it, but in a way I'm disappointed. I didn't want him to come.

He waits, and I admire the patience. I halfway expected him to keep knocking, to plead to come in, no matter how long I wait myself. Instead, he's calm and gives me time to get out of bed, slip my gown on, and walk barefoot across the room to unlock the door.

As I open it, Hisao looks into my eyes, not exactly staring but with a subtle hint of relief and joy that I've decided to let him in. I glance at the package in his left hand, then across to see the same on the right. I retreat, leaving the door open as he beckons for him to follow. I still hope he doesn't, but I promised myself I wouldn't argue or fight. Nevertheless, he enters, just as I predicted.

He closes the door behind him and paces across to the desk, putting down both plates, a quick-fix curry dish and fork upon each. "Um... it's just an instant meal," he says as he turns towards me, "but it should be filling." I must confess that I am feeling rather hungry, and however much I might not want him here the gesture is the best thing he could have done for me, short of staying away. I don't say anything, but nod graciously as he hands me a plate. I sit on the bed, he in the chair by my desk, and we eat in silence.

It's hardly the best taste, I could have cooked better had I been in the mood, but I don't say anything to him. The thought is what counts, and at least it's edible. It's almost like a regular lunchtime, and I start to think more of the happy times we've had together.

"It's kind of nice, eating together like this," says Hisao. He clearly shares my own sentiments. As I look at him, partway puzzled at the suddenness of his comment, partway agreeing with what he thinks, he continues. "We

became friends mainly over sharing lunch breaks, so it's nice to go back to those times a bit."

We pause for a few seconds as I consider his words. I notice a frown forming on his face, ever so gently, and quickly smile and nod. It's mostly to show my feelings, but also slightly to alleviate his own concerns at my lack of response.

A thought hits me, and I begin to worry. What else does he expect? I don't know if Hisao wants more than this, as I do, or if his own feelings towards me are changing, or if he's spoken to Lilly, or whatever else may be happening, that I've not seen in my closed off state. I want him, I truly do, but I also know that as long as we continue like this we can never be together, at least not as anything more than we already share. He needs to realise that, but I can't tell him. I can't bring myself to do it, I don't have the strength nor the self-belief to do so. I settle for asking him a question, a chance for me to understand how things can be for us.

"Everything's... the same as before, isn't it?" Whatever his answer, I have to accept it.

"Y-yeah," he says. "Of course it is." The stammer at the start makes Hisao seem uncertain, something I understand as well as I know that my own stammer has been steadily vanishing ever since I first met him. He continues in a more firm voice, as if to dispel any thoughts of doubt from my mind, and just as importantly, his own. "You've still got Lilly and me to help you and protect you, and once she gets back, everything will be just like she never left."

I nod at this. It's just as I feared. I don't want things to be the same, I want them to change. I want to be with him, to hold his hand and embrace him and kiss him and to show myself to him, body and soul. The thoughts race in my mind but all I can focus on is the Hisao sitting across from me with a plateful of rice and curry.

My heart is broken, but in losing a potential lover I realise I've at least gained a true friend. I can't ignore that. As much as I want things to be

different, I have to accept this and be content. Maybe they'll understand what I want, eventually, but until then, if things must stay as they were, then so be it.

We conclude our meal and sit awkwardly for a few more moments, each wondering what to say. For once I have to make the first step. Before he speaks I raise my voice. "I... I was wondering... since y-you're here..." I break off, and move across to a drawer where I pull out a slightly dusty board, folded with playing pieces hidden inside. "W-would you... like to play...?"

His response startles me a little, a clear sigh of relief. He switches seats from the chair to the bed as I set the game up, white and black pieces in neat ordered rows as always. I smile and take my position with the black side close to me, Hisao playing as white.

He makes his move and I reciprocate. As the game begins in earnest, we make the same plays we always do. The same openings, the same offense and defense, the same captures. We regress into our familiar styles of battle. I can't help but worry now that no matter what we say or do, this is always going to be how we stay. A stark vision of the future. It's not all bad, but I wanted more.

I wanted more...

27. Act 4, Chapter 3C: The Things She Said

Act 4 – Chapter Two, Third Branch: All The Things She Said

I feel stronger. As I open my eyes I can finally feel glad that the worst times have passed. It's not just that, though. Rather, it's more that I've coped better this year than I ever did before. Maybe it's because of his presence, though distant, keeping me calm and reminding me that there is still some small semblance of hope.

The nightmares came last night, there's no point in trying to deny them entry. Even then I felt as if I could fight back, as if I could finally take control of my own visions and feel as though my mind was my own again. I've never had that sense of strength or determination when wallowing in my own despair, and it was strange, yet almost familiar, as if I'd remembered how to fight rather than simply refusing to all these years. By remembering came the drive and will to succeed, and from that will came dominance. I pushed the darkness out, keeping only images of those who I didn't want by my side but still wanted the friendship, and indeed the respect, of, giving me the power to fight back and dare to dream of happier times.

Hisao never came last night. I sort of wanted him to, but then at the same time I didn't. I distinctly remember, almost like looking through frosted glass, considering in my own mind the contradictions that I constantly went through, arguing with myself whether I wanted him to show up or not. Still, in the end it didn't matter. It does make me wonder, however, whether or not his absence was because he doesn't want to be with me (in friendship or otherwise) after all, or if it's just as I hoped, that he wanted to give me the space I so desperately needed. I think I'll have to wait and see.

It's something I wouldn't have considered doing before, not for a few days at least, but today is my day to show that I can be stronger. I can be a better person than I once was. Although still lethargic, and with eyes still red from the tears before my newfound stamina arose, I swing both legs out from my bed, one after the other, and slowly push myself up. I put on a gown,

venture to the empty corridor, and make my way to the bathroom. I relieve myself, I shower, I dress, eat, drink, do all the things that a normal person does in the morning, and finally make my way to class. The stares along the way are as piercing as ever, but I'm well trained in deflecting the blows of people's whispers and the sting of their glances, keeping my head low and my pace swift.

Finally, I reach the door of Class 3-3, reaching out I grasp the handle and pull down. Most of the class are already here and I bow my head low as I enter the room, though I can't avoid noticing a brief look from Hisao as I walk along. His eyes are fixed for a few seconds, at which I blush and look away, focused on making my way to my usual seat. To his credit, he quickly stops staring and turns back to the girl he's currently talking to, who I already recognise as Miki Miura. I know her a little from... well, let's just say certain events some time ago. It's embarrassing to feel her eyes on the back of my head, though I know from previous experience that there's no malice in the gesture. Rather the opposite, in fact. At any rate I know that even while she's chatting happily to Hisao, I don't need to feel any jealousy towards her, unlike most of the girls in the class...

As I sit down I hear someone call Miki's name from the door. I recognise the face, even if I don't know the voice – I've seen him around the school often enough, dressed in the kit of the track captain. Of course, he and Miki have a bit more in common than just running. Hisao and Miki say their goodbyes and in the corner of my eye I notice her walking across to her other friends, even as Hisao starts to proceed in my direction. I do what would have once seemed impossible, just a few short weeks ago, and take the initiative. "H-hello..."

"Hi, Hanako. What's up?"

"N-nothing..." Well, this is a good start. I find myself unable to continue, not out of fear but more out of nerves, and lack of practice in social niceties even with Hisao. I have no idea what to say next.

Fortunately, Hisao takes the lead again. "Want to come with me and grab something from the cafeteria? I'm pretty hungry."

I don't want to say no, but I have not long eaten myself. Besides, he did tell Miki he was working on some maths problems. Not to mention my own thoughts at going back out there, into the crowds of students, so soon after arriving in the relative safety of the classroom. "But... I thought you were studying?"

"After being distracted by Miki, I don't think I'm going to get any work done. Come on, let's go." It's not said in a forceful way, more as a friendly suggestion despite the working, and I must admit he has a point. I know better than most how tough it can be to get back into reading or studying after you've been dragged from your reverie, and as for my own issue, after building up the courage to come out here today (so soon!) I can't really make excuses and refuse to face the world again. Every bit of progress I've made recently would be undermined by that one simple move. It's almost like a game of chess, building up strategies and carefully positioning pieces only to have a single wrong move wipe out the entire network of plans. Even if my analogy does make me sound more manipulative than I could ever hope to be in real life.

Baby steps, but every baby becomes bigger, and needs to learn to run one day. Better to try sooner rather than later. That shocks me, as I wouldn't have even entertained the thought even a few days ago, let alone weeks or even months. How have I managed to progress so far in such a short space of time? Has Hisao really had such a positive and profound influence on me, greater than anyone previously?

Could this be... what I hoped for all along?

28. Act 4, Chapter 4C: Of Greener Pastures

Act 4 – Chapter Three, Third Branch: Dreaming of Greener Pastures

I never thought, never even dared to imagine, that something like this could happen to me. That I would be able to make the kind of headway over the past few days that I have done, so soon after my... my birthday. Especially without Lilly being around to gently coax me out of my solitude again, as she has done so many times before. Perhaps being given the space I needed, as well as the support I have come to realise I can rely on from Hisao, was the catalyst for my strangely unalarming progress. I haven't spoken to Miss Yumi either for a little while, though we haven't stopped our usual sessions. I heard from Mutou-sensai however that she was very pleased with everything I'd accomplished so far, with or without help. I know I still have a long way to go before I can truly recover, assuming I ever really can, but baby steps are better than no steps at all, and tiny forays into the unknown will always hold a promise of something new, regardless of the fear and trepidation felt at first.

As I walk in town, I notice a familiar figure through an even more familiar window. Two figures, in fact, and one I've seen often enough in the library as well as here. The other I haven't spent quite as much time with over the past few days – not because of any kind of relapse (yet again) to my former depressive state, but more out of a general lack of opportunities to meet. While Lilly's been away we haven't met up for lunch as often, the two of us still here, but we've certainly spoken on occasion in class. Though, as I said, it's only been a few days since I was bedridden, and the surprise at myself is still at the front of my mind. At any rate, it's quite the coincidence to see him here in town.

I must have been standing for longer than I thought, as the (relatively few) people walking near me push past. Nobody looks at my scars, but down here I don't expect them to pay much attention. It doesn't stop my fears from taking over whenever I'm out alone, knowing that it's only the fact that they're used to Yamaku's presence that keeps them from being too interested. Or indeed, too distrusting. Then again, maybe it's because there

are so few people around that I feel brave enough to venture here today, on my own, without my usual air of apprehension. As I think about this, the first figure, who I clearly recognise as Yuuko, spots me through the window and waves. I see Hisao look up, and I give a little wave back, before crossing the street and entering the Shanghai. Upon my arrival I make my way directly to where Hisao and Yuuko are sitting. It's quiet in here, so she must have plenty of free time for once to be able to sit and talk to the customers, which is nice really. She spends so much time and effort working so hard, it's good for her to have a little break sometimes.

I take a seat opposite Hisao, next to Yuuko. "H-hello..."

"Good afternoon," Yuuko replies.

"Hi, Hanako," says Hisao. "What's up?"

I reply truthfully, since not much really is happening. "N-nothing... just... g-going for a walk... since the weather was nice." Maybe things aren't quite as great as I hoped, as the stammer comes out in full force. Still, I knew things wouldn't always be so easy, so it isn't much of a surprise to me. The others are both used to it as well, so no comment is passed.

"Yeah, I get what you mean," comes the response from Hisao. "I'm glad I decided to study here instead of the library." Despite the fact, of course, that all his usual library compatriots are right here anyway.

Yuuko nods her head in agreement. "It's nice. It's just a shame that summer can't last forever." She pauses, before remembering in a sudden rush that she works here. "Oh wait, sorry, um, would you like a drink?" Truth be told, I'm not too thirsty, and more than happy to stay and talk to Yuuko along with Hisao, rather than be in a hurry to send her on her way. I shake my head and the look of relief on her face is self-evident.

"H-how are you going with studying?" If I'm going to make an effort to fight my way out of my usual slump, as I have been doing recently, I need to force back the stammering and take the initiative. Keeping the conversation going is just one way to do it, I suppose.

"Okay...ish." He waits a few seconds in silence. "Oh yeah, have you talked with Lilly?"

"I'm interested too," says Yuuko. "How is she doing?" Fortunately, I have spoken to Lilly, though only briefly – it's hard to judge the time difference, and when she's not asleep while I'm awake I could well be interrupting her time with her family. That's much more important than chatting to me.

"Sh-she's enjoying it... I think." That's all I can really say, and both my companions are savvy enough to resist pushing the question.

"Ah, it would be so nice to travel to Scotland," says Yuuko, eyes closed in wonder. "Green fields, castles, lovely small towns, men in kilts, interesting history..." I almost think that she's focused a little more on the men in kilts than the other reasons to visit, though I can't say I blame her...

Suddenly, the door open and the bell jingles, and Yuuko is disturbed from her own reverie. Her face shows signs of panic, and I too am surprised at the sound of the door. In all the peace of being here I'd forgotten that customers do sometimes come along, and that Yuuko does still work here. She bows quickly, jumping up and running across to greet the new arrivals and perform her duties as a Shanghai hostess. As she goes, I notice Hisao looking over at the people who have just walked in, made all the more obvious by his awkward angle forcing him to crane his head to see the door clearly.

As I watch him, he turns away from the couple who have come inside, and faces me. I can't exactly hide my embarrassment any more than usual, since my hair only covers one eye and cheek, and so I turn my face away. He still makes eye contact though, before I can completely avert my own eyes, and his boldness stuns me a little. He presses on.

"I was just thinking that it's nice to have ambitions for the future. Yuuko was telling me a little about her university aspirations before."

"Oh." I wonder what his point is. Not that I don't want to hear about Yuuko's plans, it would certainly be a nice topic of general chatter, but it

seems like an odd thing to bring up. Is he simply trying to push me into revealing more about what I want to do after Yamaku? In all honesty I can say it's not something I've ever given much thought to. I've always been more concerned with the here and now, and with the past. Especially with the past. It doesn't leave much room for future thinking.

"It's a shame," he continues. "If she wasn't so neurotic and overworked, I think she could be a really happy person." He breaks off, and although I'm a little suspicious of his line of conversation, almost a comment on my own state (though obviously not my workload), I get the feeling he doesn't really want to talk much any more. That's fine by me. We wait in silence for a few moments, and I'm just happy to be in Hisao's company, without the stress of having to endure people's stares and my own internal bitterness and self-loathing. Without having to discuss topics that I really don't feel like talking about. Without any pressure, but just the two of us, together.

After a short while he speaks again. "Sorry if I'm a bit distracted. I need to try and get this done, otherwise I'm going to flunk the history exams pretty hard." He runs a hand through his hair, and I can understand the frustration he must be feeling. I should probably be getting some work done as well, especially since I don't have the excuse of missing classes this year, like usual. It's been a nice little interlude though. "I hope I have more luck with that than this. Damn."

It seems like he's pretty stressed, but what else is on his mind, I wonder?.
"W-what with?"

"Oh, uh... I was going to... write to Iwanako. Right now though, this is more important."

Oh.

There's little I can say. At least he was honest, I guess.

I think about it, and remember the letter that he mentioned before. It's been a while since he received it, so to reply after all this time... maybe he feels as nervous about that as I do about him. I could definitely understand why.

My heart and mind are both torn down the middle, but upon reflection, he could be replying for all kinds of reasons. And besides, if he was still in love with her, surely he'd have written back as soon as possible? Then again, there could be all kinds of reasons why he would wait. Perhaps he wanted to be certain of his reply. Maybe he just didn't have time at any point to sit down and write it.

I force myself to stop, and to be logical. It's a difficult personal matter, of course it would take him so long to write back. If he still loved her, then surely he would have spoken about her more, and wouldn't have allowed the two of us to become so close. I have nothing to worry about.

That is to say, I hope I have nothing to worry about.

I push it out of my mind and move on. I can let myself rest easy, and try to relax, letting myself fall back onto the soft seat cushion behind me, looking outside and watching the people stroll by. I wait for him to finish his work, and Hisao and I leave together, returning to the dormitories. We separate outside, by the steps, and go our own ways. As I return to my room to start my own work, my mind returns to Iwanako, and drifts away again.

In a way, I think this jealousy is a good sign. I can recognise it for what it is, and embrace it as a sign that maybe I can fight for the things I want. I can fight for what I once felt I didn't deserve. Time will tell if Hisao is someone I need to fight for, and my hopes are high that his response to Iwanako will be nothing more than closure. But in my own thoughts, I can reassure myself that finally, I'm becoming stronger.

I can be real. I can be me.

29. Act 4, Chapter 5C: So Here We Are

Act 4 – Chapter Four, Third Branch: So Here We Are

Hisao and I haven't seen much of each other recently. Not that it's a bad thing – we need some time apart, given what's fast approaching. I don't usually have much chance to study when in my melancholy, and now I have the time I should grasp it with both hands. That being said, I'd rather study alone, in my room. Too many students descend upon the library around the exam period, and my comforting eyrie can all too easily succumb to the usual stares and thinly veiled comments that have plagued my years here. Besides, I'm used to the solitude.

I can't deny, though, that I miss his presence. Lilly being away is still amplifying my loneliness and Hisao was like a breath of fresh air when I understood that he really did care for my well-being, not just as a means to achieving his own self satisfaction as I so feared. I've dared to do what I thought would be beyond me – leaving my door unlocked, slightly ajar even. An open invite if Hisao decides to drop by.

A few minutes pass as I lie on my bed, reading through books and borrowed notes. A few hours go by as I sit at my desk, writing out passages and memorising formulae and figures. A couple of days are endured as I close my eyes and whisper to myself, testing my knowledge of my last class. And all the while, my door is unlocked, open, until I finally hear footsteps making their way slowly down the corridor outside...

A very light knocking at the timber is enough to confirm that the owner of those feet is here to see me. Only Hisao would be so gentle; the only other candidates would have pushed their way in with a loud "WAHAHA!" and no thought to the sanctity of my peace and quiet. I say nothing, but glance out of the window and wait for him to enter, all thoughts of revision gone. My book lies open and ignored on the desk in front of me.

I wonder how I look to him? How does he see me right now...?

"Good evening, Hanako." I turn my head slightly, if only to acknowledge his presence, and maintain my calm and peaceful demeanour. He walks to the desk and puts a hand on the surface, tilting his head down as if to get a better view of my own face. "What's up?"

I gasp, uncertain of his thoughts as to why I do so, but for me more out of surprise at how close he is. I could almost reach out to touch his hand, a gentle brush, skin on skin... I hold back. Baby steps, though steps nonetheless, are small by their nature. So small, and yet, so many.

My mouth hangs open a little, and I feel the heat rushing to my face as my cheeks turn scarlet. I turn more, though only a little, so I can see him clearly. I look into his eyes, his light brown eyes, and I hold my gaze. He stares at me too, but it's somehow different to every other occasion. It's not the same as the stares I get when I walk in town, or when surrounded by my colleagues in the school premises. He isn't looking at me, he's looking into me.

"Hanako...?" I try to speak, in response to his quizzical comment, but the words refuse to escape my lips. I'm not even sure what I want to say, just that I want to say it, whatever it is. I want him to know every detail of my heart, how he makes me feel, how he lifted me from the dark when no-one else could, but although the words exist within me they reject any attempt to leave. I can make an attempt, though. Strength can come from many places, and the best strength comes from subtlety.

"Hi... sao..." I force the sound out, but as I do so I realise I'm not the only one blushing. Indeed, my face feels a little less red, and I can guess my own embarrassment has faded away. Hisao, on the other hand, is starting to glow. He quickly looks away, covering his face, and out of instinct I do the same. Perhaps some things will never change.

Silence falls. We both wait for the other to make a move, and once I'd have stubbornly waited all day. I attempt to steel myself to bridge the gap, to prove to myself as much as to Hisao that I can for once take the initiative. Before my chance arrives, however...

"Hanako... I want to show you something." My eyes flash in surprise, wondering what he wants to show me, as I see him breathe in deeply. "I'm not going to strip naked or anything weird, I'm just going to take off my shirt."

What? What a way to properly begin a conversation! Although I sense my heart beginning to beat faster, my pulse racing and eyes widening, mouth dropping slightly, my face regaining its former crimson hue... I find myself doing exactly what I hate the most, staring at Hisao as he unknots his tie and loosens his buttons, starting at the top and slowly working his way down. I try to keep myself from breathing too loudly, never quite certain if I'm succeeding or just making myself look like a lustful fool. Finally, he removes the last button and breathes in again, looking at me with an expression as if he's seeking my approval for something.

My gaze is drawn from his face down to his chest, and I can see through the gap in the fabric a thin red line running along the middle. A single brief flicker of my eyes, upwards, and as I meet his own he nods just once. An understanding is formed between us, one where we have no need to speak, for we can see and feel everything of importance in this small room, alone together. I can feel a stirring of sorts, in a place too private to discuss, and am reminded of that simple truth that I am, always, a woman. I gently touch his scar with a single finger, then two, then more until my palm is lightly caressing the raw tissue. It takes me a second to realise which hand I've used. Out of nothing more than pure instinct, I've touched Hisao's scar with my own ruined hand, once set ablaze by something much more damaging and now alight with the glowing embers of emotion. Even so, my hand is steady. Not a single tremor to break the moment.

"This is..." I'm almost scared to speak any more, for fear of spoiling the moment. Hisao takes the reins to complete my tentative query.

"The scar from the surgery that followed my heart attack. The surgeons had to cut open my chest to operate on my heart."

"I never knew..." It's bigger than I expected. Instead of being a tiny little line of almost healed scar tissue, the scar runs a jagged line from the top of his chest right down to the middle, unbroken as it goes. I trace the line along its whole length, making sure to use only the lightest touch to avoid causing him any pain.

"You're the first person to see this since I left the hospital."

My first thought belies my spiteful side, however small that may be, as I'm pleased that Iwanako hasn't seen what I have seen, nor felt what I have felt. I swiftly push this to one side though, and focus on the here and now.

"But... why are you showing this to me?"

"I wanted to prove to myself that I could do this; that I could accept my past and move on. I wanted to show that to you, as well." I nod at his words. I can understand, it's what I want to do more than anything in the world. It's just so hard, even now. I'm not sure I'm ready yet. This gesture, though...

I still feel the warmth that lingers below, and find myself torn between love and lust, the sensual undertone to everything taking place. My gaze remains but becomes unfocused, my mind dwelling on other matters, of both the heart and of the imagination. I have no idea how long we remain like this, what could be seconds seem like minutes and minutes turn into hours. Neither of us make any kind of move. Until, suddenly, it's all over, as I remove my hand and look away, my face returning to its previous ruby complexion. Hisao starts to button up his shirt again and I worry that maybe I've portrayed myself as nothing more than a desperate, lonely girl with a perverted mind and lack of self control.

It's almost as if he can sense my concerns, as he flashes me a brief smile whilst putting on his tie. "So... I guess you're not the only one that's scarred."

My fears resolved a little, the tension in the air dissipating, I let a smile of my own show. I almost want to laugh a little too, but find it to be too much to manage. The smile will do just fine. "Thank you... H-Hisao. I think... I understand." We wait another moment but the silence this time feels less

forced, less awkward. I still think it's getting late though, a suspicion confirmed upon a quick sighting of my watch. "Hisao... um..."

Thankfully, he saw where I was looking and takes the hint. "Yeah, I'd better be going. I'll be thankful for some sleep. It's been a long day, after all." He stifles a yawn and I realise I'm almost as tired myself. "Good night, Hanako."

"G-good night." When he leaves, he closes the door behind him, a stark contrast to how it was when he arrived. I don't lock it, though. After all, I am a woman, no longer a girl, and with that comes all the urges and desires that a woman has. I elect to take a short trip to the bathroom before bed, and let my imagination carry me away...

30. Act 4, Chapter 6C: City Of Angels

Act 4 – Chapter Five, Third Branch: Lost in the City of Angels

Even I'm not entirely sure why I'm in the city. I suppose it was the need for a break, from the monotony of revising and studying and just being at Yamaku. Normally at a time like this, I would retreat to the lunch room, but there's no guarantee Hisao would be around to join me, and certainly Lilly wouldn't be available, given her present location on the other side of the world. Failing that, perhaps the Shanghai, but again I wouldn't have anyone there I know. Yuuko is having to pull extra time for a few days in the library, just to deal with the added influx of students – the precise reason I'm no longer there. In the city, I may still get the stares and the attention I'd rather avoid receiving, but at least nobody there is likely to see me again any time soon. It's something that, paradoxically, can be somewhat easier to deal with, since a complete stranger seeing me is a one-off incident that will soon pass from their minds. I know they won't remember me for very long, regardless of how unforgettable my disability may seem to be, and so it's easier for me to get over the initial embarrassment. Of course, it's not exactly that they won't remember me – nobody can forget my face, the scars that adorn it both so stunningly and distastefully. It's more that they won't remember the person, the individual who wears them like stigmata. When strangers stare, it's better (in a strange and terrible way) than when my colleagues, my fellow students, stare – the same people who know my name, my age, my home and all those other intimate details that come with co-inhabiting a dorm or taking a class in school.

Which makes it all the more out-of-synch for me when I visit the shop Hisao and I went to previously, where he and Lilly had purchased my... my birthday gifts. As if I need a reminder of that, but the presents and the pleasant wishes and feelings behind them are enough to outweigh the negative connotations of the event itself. The store owner recognises me as soon as I enter, almost putting the lie to my earlier thoughts about remembering me despite my face and scars. Then I realise, he probably doesn't have very many customers, although that raises the question of how he can run a successful business, particularly in such a niche market as

antiques. Still, he doesn't make any comment, and in fact seems rather more helpful than in our previous encounter – perhaps realising that I am still only human, regardless of my physical appearance. We chat a little, though I don't give much away – my reserved personality still shines outward. It does give me an idea, though. Since I'm not so busy today, perhaps I could see if Hisao wants to spend some time with me? It's a vain hope, but Lilly gave me his number before she left, in case I needed him for anything, and any attempt by me to be stronger needs to be pushed further than the baby steps so far taken.

I take out my phone and look at the three numbers stored within its memory. Lilly, Akira, and Hisao. Such a lonely bunch of numbers, with no-one else to keep them company, but who else would I call? Shizune wouldn't have much use for a phone, all things considered, and I'm hardly close to her as it is. Misha too, I'm not so close to, and she'd probably deafen me every time she answered a call. Miki... maybe not. We'd have very little to talk about, despite previous attempts by her to do so, and besides, that's awkwardness I could do without. Yuuko, perhaps, but I never really asked for her number, and before the past couple of weeks I wouldn't have dared anyway. I push the thoughts away and tap on Hisao's name, his number dialling automatically.

It rings a couple of times before he answers, as my heart pounds in my chest. I don't fail to notice the irony, given who I'm calling. "Hello," I hear as the ringing stops, "Hisao Nakai speaking." I pause, trying not to breathe too loudly as I consider what to say. "Hello?" he repeats.

"H... Hisao?"

"Hanako?" He recognises my voice, despite being on the other end of a phone. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting you to call. What's up?" Strangely, to me at least, he doesn't yet question how I have his number.

"U-um... I... um..." I revert to my usual stuttering way, almost regretting the bold move to make this phone call. I push the offending thoughts away and

focus on my initial aim. "If... if you're not busy... I-I was wondering if y-you would... I-like to... m-"

I'm spared from digging myself an even deeper hole by Hisao's realisation of my intentions. "Meet up?"

"Yes!" The relief in my voice is clear, but hopefully not too much so. I backtrack a little... "U-um... I mean..."

"That sounds fine. Are you at the Shanghai?"

I understand why he would assume I'm there, since it's one of the only haunts of mine where I could reasonably chat on a phone, the library being an (apparent) haven of calm and quiet in normal times. He must know that I wouldn't be there with so many people studying for exams, nor in the lunch room on a weekend. The Shanghai is the wrong answer, but a perfectly rational conclusion to come to other than my own room. "I-I'm in... the city..." The nerves creep back into my voice again. I'm standing outside the antique shop, but begin to walk slowly as I speak, if only to clear my head a bit more.

If Hisao is surprised at my revelation, he hides it well. "That works out well; I'm just wandering around there now. Where are you?" I have to say, I'm surprised myself. It's a strange coincidence that we should both be in the city, whether for a purpose or just at a loose end, at the same time. It most likely means nothing, but a flicker of wonder works its way into my mind, as if it's fate or some kind of divine providence. A silly thought to be sure, but comforting nonetheless.

I look around to get the name of the street, and some sort of landmark to identify my location, passing the details with a few directions (as much as I can remember) to my current conversational partner. It turns out Hisao isn't very far from where I now am, so we arrange to meet at a small cafe nearby, at an outside table, and I continue to proceed on foot. I arrive before him, and wait alone, happy in the knowledge that the couples and groups of friends occupying the tables nearby are too busy with each other and their own engagements to notice my face and scars. Even so, my chosen table,

which I'll readily admit I was lucky to find, is away in a corner, inconspicuous and hidden slightly from most of the other patrons.

It's not very long before Hisao arrives, and I greet him with a small wave when I notice him. "A-are you feeling okay?" I ask as he sits down, my first thoughts being for his own well-being and health. He's trying to hide how out of breath he is, even attempting a small laugh to deflect attention, but I know from my own years of experience of attempts to distract from my true feelings that he's not being genuine. Though in my case it was always more the situation that I would try and make a scenario so awkward for the other party they would leave, or else flee in fright myself, my timid nature doing the work for me – in this case it's rather different, and I wouldn't be too happy if he does run away. Assuming he's physically capable of that right now.

"Not very fit these days," he replies, stating the obvious. "Don't mind me." I nod at Hisao's words but my face still betrays my concern. I look at his face, notice the rapid breath that he's trying to hide, the eyes resting on my own features... I quickly look down again, but inside my heart begins to beat just that little bit faster... Before things become too hard to bear, the waitress arrives with my order, placed just before Hisao turned up. A cup of tea, nothing more, but it's the perfect opportunity to hide my face that's growing more red even on the unblemished side, tilting my head to one side to ensure the scars are covered more by my hair.

It's not even for his benefit. I don't think about it, but again I don't mind him seeing the scars – he already knows me, and knows about my background. The waitress is the one who I perform this task for, to hide myself away more out of instinct and habit than any real concern for my appearance. It's only when Hisao starts to speak rapidly to the waitress that I realise my hand is still showing, catching her attention.

"Excuse me, may I place an order?" The waitress nods in response and Hisao scans the menu she offers, while he makes his choice. I notice her pointedly looking at him rather than me, both a blessing and an indignation acting in tandem. The order is decided - "Can I have a mango smoothie

please?" - and with another nod the waitress retreats inside, almost bouncing in an apparent relief to be away from us. Hisao turns to me, and I decide not to show him what I saw. I push it away as I have done with so many other things (not necessarily a healthy way to be, but certainly a valid short term solution when needs must...).

"N-not coffee...?"

The distraction seems to work. "I think I'd die from this heat if I had something like coffee right now." I freeze at his words, for two reasons. His poor choice of words, regarding the heat, doesn't bother me as much as it should, and I can attribute it to a simple Freudian slip, a slip of the tongue meant with no malice. The other reason, however, is again regarding Hisao's own health concerns, and although he may be able to joke about it, I can't bring myself to laugh at such a morbid outlook on one's own state of being. My own condition is no longer life-threatening, but Hisao could have many years left on this planet, or a mere matter of minutes, and that constant flux is still a source of mental anguish for me. Albeit one that I can, usually, hide fairly well. My concern for him is still an issue, though, and it seems to show, as he stops speaking and simply waits.

We sit in silence, punctuated only by the ambience around us and my own occasional sips of tea, until the waitress returns with Hisao's smoothie. She doesn't stare as she did earlier, though she doesn't outright avoid looking at me either – a small improvement, I suppose. On a similar note, however, when she walks away I catch Hisao watching her in return. A pang of envy, now uncomfortably familiar, strikes my heart as I ask him, "Do you think that she looks... pretty...?" I can tell myself, although not what one would call stunning, she definitely has a charm and grace about her that draws the eye. Something I could never hope to have myself.

He stops for a second, and a tinge of red appears in his cheeks. "Nah, can't really say that I'm into that look. She just looked a lot like an old friend I knew before my heart attack."

I try to avoid the dangerous waters that the tenuous conversation is drifting towards, steering away from who I think he may be talking about, and into more general talk of friendships both past and present. "Did you... have many friends?"

"I had a few at my previous school," Hisao replies, "though I wouldn't say a lot. The four of us just hung around together after school and stuff."

It sounds nice. My questioning becomes more natural, feels less forced. "Do you still talk to them?"

Hisao shakes his head. "No. We gradually lost contact while I was stuck in the hospital."

"You're not... saddened by that? Or angry?" Having so few friends, I can hardly think about how I'd feel if I lost any of them. Despite my well documented social issues, and my occasional anger and (perhaps misdirected) resentment at my friends, I don't think I could bear to lose Hisao, Lilly, Akira, or even Yuuko. It's somewhat difficult for me to consider how he could have felt as his companions drifted away one by one...

"Well, life did move on for them while I was stuck in the ward. I was pretty sore about it at the time, but now it's just a bunch of nice memories. Besides, once I came to Yamaku I found new friends as well." My own time hiding my emotions, pushing them away for the sake of avoiding attention, give a hint through his tone and manner of speech that he's not being completely honest. I don't press the subject any further though. If things were as dark for him as I suspect then it'll do no good to drag those shadowed thoughts back into focus. There's a brief silence again, but between us things seem better, the tension I always feel steadily lessening as our sort-of 'date' progresses.

"That's right," Hisao suddenly begins, "I was going to ask..." He pauses, and I show a sign of interest at his approaching query. "I didn't know you had a mobile phone. How'd you get my number?"

I'm honestly surprised it took him this long to realise. I answer with honesty, "L-Lilly... gave it... to me." I smile at his confused expression.

"You know, you could have just asked; I'd have given it to you." His face and tone are a mix of mild amusement, happiness, and annoyance, almost with a sense of regret, as if he wishes I'd been bold enough to ask him directly for his number in the first place. "Want to exchange email addresses?"

I nod and show my agreement, as we both dig out our phones. Interestingly enough, our phones are the same, albeit different colours. "Nice phone," Hisao says. I can't avoid letting out a short laugh, more a giggle than anything; indeed I don't even want to avoid it.

"I didn't pick it out myself, though."

"Oh?"

"It was a present, from Lilly." At the end of the day, I wouldn't have bothered buying a phone myself. Too few contacts for it to be worthwhile. "I never really needed a phone, and I couldn't afford one. She bought me one for Christmas, though, saying that we could use it to keep in touch." I break off, content to let my words sink in.

"Lilly's a very special person to you, isn't she?"

He's right. She's almost like a sister I never had the chance to grow up with. "She is. I... love her... very much." My eyes drop, the smile on my face becoming all the more fixed and genuine, as my mind fills with the happiest memories I have of my friendship with Lilly. After a moment, we finally swap email addresses and tap them into our phones, building up the contacts. "...Done. That makes three, now."

"Three?"

"Lilly, Akira, and you."

"Ah, Akira. She's an interesting person, isn't she?" I forget, Hisao doesn't really know her that well, only meeting her briefly in the past few weeks. Unlike our earlier subject of discussion, I don't feel any envy regarding Akira, maybe because I can tell just from Hisao's tone and manner that he's asking in a purely innocent way. She's a bit old for him anyway, I guess...

"She is. She's also really nice, though. Her suit makes her... look a bit cool." It's a fair comment to make, she certainly knows how to pull off the masculine look while still retaining that feminine air about her. It's somewhat... impressive, I think.

"I'm a little surprised you know each other well, what with her job taking up so much of her time." He's failed to understand, given how few friends I really have, that those ones I do have mean the world to me, and more besides...

"How many... do you have?" Asking about his phone contacts, I dodge Hisao's question, not out of malice, but because it'll be nice to see if he can work out the answer for himself, even if he keeps the result hidden.

"Me? About nine or ten." He hesitates, and I can only assume this is out of careful consideration of his next words, to avoid any wrong comment hurting my feelings. I really don't mind, but his subtle sentiment without being overt and pushy is just the kind of support I need. Quiet, but reliable. I say nothing, allowing him to speak in his own time. "I imagine that Lilly would have more than both of us put together, probably." I'd say he's right. Another giggle works its way through my lips, another smile dawning on my face...

"Do you mind if I ask you something that I've been wondering?" Hisao says. I shake my head, meaning that I don't mind. "You don't seem very jealous of Lilly having lots of friends. Don't you want to make some more friends yourself, or get to know some of hers?"

He's treading on thin ice now, a shockingly fast reversal from the quiet concern and consideration of earlier. I choose to head him off early, using the truth itself as my weapon, knowing his reaction to my words will be a

clear indication of whether he does intend to push me into 'becoming normal', as I once feared. "I'm not jealous. I... don't like people, so I don't mind not having many friends." Another momentary pause. "I..." I rub my arm, unsure of whether to continue.

Hisao's silence is a decent indicator that he's not going to force the point. My fears were unfounded after all. Emboldened by this, I choose to bare myself once more, speaking about my past with an honesty that I could never bring myself to achieve with the layperson straight up asking about my tragedy. "In middle school, I got bullied... a lot. I was called names, and got excluded from work groups and sports teams. There were... worse things too."

Talking about my past is hard, but it's something I wouldn't have considered a few weeks ago, and now I feel I trust him enough to be able to bare myself. So much has changed, oh so quickly. "And that's what made you not like other people?"

He's a bit far off, in terms of timing. It was before then, as I indicate with a single shake of the head. "That was... elementary school." I wait a moment, letting my silence fill in the blanks. Surely he can understand just how difficult it was? Children can be so cruel, especially since they haven't learned like adults have how to stay silent. They let themselves say the first thing that comes to mind, and give no thought to the damage they can cause. I take my phone and allow myself to be distracted, the memories starting to well up and make me more aware, more paranoid, of the people around me. Though my conscious mind knows they don't notice me, most of the couples nearby caring more about their own interactions, I find myself reverting yet again to that same old state of mind, crippling myself without reasonable cause...

"Hey, Hanako, wait for me. I'll be right back." Hisao rushes off, slipping his phone in his pocket and replacing the now empty smoothie cup on the table. I don't understand, where is he going?

"Wait, w-what? Wh-where are you going?"

"Just stay here, I'll be back in a bit!" He leaves me alone and I'm left to ponder what he's up to. It takes around half an hour for him to return, the time spent by me imagining all sorts of scenarios, not many of them exactly pleasant. It would be easy for him to abandon me here, though I see no reason why he would. I can make my way back to Yamaku fairly easily, and why go to the trouble of agreeing to see me here if he was going to leave partway through? It would make no sense. Is it to do with my past, and my admittedly minor attempt at opening up again? Have I frightened him away, too much baggage for one person to deal with so early? My mind races and I try again to distract myself, the internet on my relatively tiny screen providing a useful way to escape from these dangerous thoughts.

After a while Hisao makes his return, clutching a small bag in one hand, which he lightly drops in front of me. "Is this...?" I wonder what could be inside the bag?

"It's for you. You can open it."

"B-but..."

"Go on." He's insistent that I open it here, right now, presumably so he can see my reaction – whether positive or negative. It takes me a few moments to consider before ultimately deciding to open the bag, allowing the loose contents to spill onto the table.

Before me lies a silver chain, with a loop of cloth at one end and a delicately carved flower made of timber, hand painted in white and yellow, the gentle colours of cream and corn. The carving is rudely done and imperfect, clearly made by hand by a craftsman without much experience, but it only adds to the charm, its limitations resonating with my own marred appearance. To me, it's beautiful.

I glance at Hisao - "But... it's not... Christmas, or my birthday..."

"It's fine, don't worry about it. I just thought it might be nice to have something to decorate your phone with." I realise that really, this phone could hardly be considered mine – Lilly bought it, both as a gift and as a

useful tool to stay in touch, and Hisao bought the silver chained flower, not me. I do appreciate them both, still, massively and without either of them realising the full extent of my gratitude, how valuable the boost to my own sense of self-worth proved to be. Even so, there's a not-so-insignificant twinge of guilt in my mind and heart.

"I-I don't have anything to give to you..."

"I told you, it's fine. Friends can give things to each other like this sometimes, right?"

"Friends..." I don't even try to hide the smile, though I do look down out of slight embarrassment. It's a good thing, though. I wonder if he knows I want more than that from him, more than friendship? I nod, attach the chain to my phone, and smile again at him. "Thank you... Hisao."

He smiles back at me, and it crosses my mind that maybe, just maybe, I'll have to be bold and take the next step. I don't know if he's ever going to feel ready to make a move and show his feelings towards me, if he really has them. Maybe he only does see me as a friend, and I'm wasting my time by pretending that we could ever be anything more. It would be the most confident thing I've ever done, if I do take that step, and I'll need to think it through carefully. Chances are I won't even have the drive to do it, I'll probably back down as I have done with so many other things before. Then again, I've gotten this far, and built up my confidence to a level that, while weak by most standards, is still vastly improved on any kind of feeling I've previously had. Should I try it? Should I be bold, when we're next alone and the opportunity comes? As I consider it, Hisao's voice draws me back to the here and now.

"I guess I'd better be going if I want to catch the next bus back to town. You coming as well?"

"Ah, y-yes." I take my things and we walk together to the bus station, my hand lightly resting on his arm, no longer a symbol (I hope) of fear, but more a sign of affection. I hope that he notices too. As we walk, I think about the future, and about my plans, to take whatever opportunity comes

and push forward with a new step in our slow dance towards each other. I have no idea when that opportunity will come, or what it will be, but at least I can go forward knowing that whatever I do, I do on my own terms.

I only hope that I can bring myself to take that step when I see it.

31. Act 4, Chapter 7C: White Queen Offensive

Act 4 – Chapter Six, Third Branch: White Queen Offensive

My mind resolved, at least a little more than it was before (though admittedly that's not saying much), I still end up arriving late to class. A queue for the showers is to blame, considering I normally end up either first by a considerable margin, or last by a narrower time frame, due almost entirely to my condition.

In any case, I manage to arrive before Mutou-sensei, without being early enough to avoid the usual stares from a few of my classmates (a practice that thankfully subsided considerably after the first few weeks of being at Yamaku, but still has a few hangers-on, particularly from those who came to this school after I did). Sometimes, rarely, I start to think everyone is used to it by now, seeing my scars, but then the worries kick in and I'm back to my stressed, withdrawn self. Now it's getting better, but it's still always hard work to force my mind back to a calm state of being.

As I enter I notice Hisao almost immediately. Our eyes meet, and I see him frozen, as if the two of us have switched places. It's not like him, and the sudden role reversal almost feels creepy. I say nothing, and make my way to my seat without a second glance.

What must he be thinking?

The day passes uneventfully, and I barely speak to Hisao in all that time. We spend lunch together, but it seems so awkward. It feels like a dull pressure on my heart, making it ache ever so slightly. Every time I think of talking to him, a lump forms in my throat and I'm unable to form the words.

I realise now how lonely I've been, all this time. Having had a taste of friendship from Lilly and Akira, and possibly something more from Hisao, I understand what I was missing. And I miss it now. Deeper down, though, a nasty suspicion lurks, that he's just following the role of protector as I once believed Lilly to be doing too. If he is, and he only cares enough to want to wrap me up in cotton and keep me safe, then we can never be anything

more than this. Still, the little things, like the phone charm, are enough to convince my conscious mind of his genuine nature, regardless of what my subconscious thinks.

The contradictions surface again! My mind is uneasy, yet I justify everything to myself to try and quell any fears and doubts, and again I chase myself in circles. He mentioned the library earlier, and I make a decision, to finally face my fears, to focus myself and perform the boldest move yet, in approaching him directly and asking him to spend time with me. No hesitation, no feeble attempts to back out of my own choice. If he won't take the leap, then I'll have to instead.

He's sitting in the same space as always. "A-are you busy...?"

"Hanako!?" His reaction is one of surprise, and I back away just a little. He didn't expect me to come to him here, with so many people in the library. Then again, neither did I. "Sorry, you just startled me."

Hisao pauses a little, then whips his head around quickly, looking back at the book he was reading before I turned up. I wait with patience, knowing that he's not paying attention to the text - I've used the same tactic myself many times before, usually with greater success, to deter people from staying and trying to talk. It may sound like ignorance, but to me it was usually closer to blessed peace. At any rate, after a moment or two he stops trying to read and, with a sigh, closes the book. "What's up?"

I'm not entirely sure how to answer, now the first step has been made. I'm effectively riding on the wind, hoping I can fly. "I was just... w-wondering what you were r-reading..." He gets up without answering and puts the book back on the shelf.

"Just an English textbook." I think, upon hearing his reply, how Lilly would be the perfect tutor for that subject. I can't exactly say my own English is very good, but with Lilly's help I've certainly improved over the course of my studies.

"H-has it helped?"

"It helped me realise that I don't like English, yeah." Again, Lilly would be the ideal remedy to that condition. It eases me enough that I return to the same state I've felt so often recently and never before, a small giggle escaping my lips.

As I laugh, however quietly (we are in a library after all), I see Hisao looking at me again, a very minor look of confusion on his face. It's concerning. "I-is something... wrong?"

His answer throws me, yet positively. "Hey Hanako, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"I-I don't mind."

"I... want to know what your life was like. Your life before coming to Yamaku." He speaks plainly, and although I've touched on aspects before I've never gone into even the barest amount of detail about my life before this. Is Hisao actually... treating me as an equal? Well, not before time. I think long and hard before I answer, not exactly questioning my decision to let myself get so close, but rather wondering if I trust myself enough to reveal myself in such a way. Eventually, a single nod signifies my consent. With a condition, that is. If he considers me an equal...

"Okay. B-but in return... you have to t-tell me about your life as well..." I stammer less, I notice, and speak relatively firmly. I feel resolute as I utter the words. Hisao nods, and I start to walk away, as he follows, so we can avoid disturbing our fellow students as they study (and also hopefully avoid any eavesdroppers, like Misha for example, from hearing me talk about my old life...). I don't know where this will end, but I realise that this is just the kind of opportunity I was thinking about following our 'date' in the city. I'm glad, however tentatively, for taking it.

"I guess..." he starts, "we'll start with coming to Yamaku." I listen in silence. "Let's see... I was in the hospital when my parents first told me about Yamaku Academy. The doctors told me I shouldn't go to my old school any more. My parents agreed and persuaded me to apply for Yamaku, even though it would mean living away from them for the first time."

There's a note of bitterness, but not as much as I've heard in others, nor in Hisao himself when we first met. He was as reluctant to open up back then as I was, as I still am in fact. To my ears, it sounds as if he's accepted his place here, whether to a greater or lesser extent. "It must have... been hard for you."

"Well... yeah, I have to admit that it was. My parents both work long hours and full-time, so having to live reasonably independently wasn't anything new to me. It was the fact that I was going to a school for disabled students that hit hardest, I think." I can understand, and it seems my guess to the mildly bitter tone in the voice was correct. "And you?"

Before I can answer, a small group walks by, and I react on pure instinct, pushing close to Hisao. Or is it just instinct? I'm not certain, but it feels like an impulse in my mind telling me, "take the chance, take the opportunity". His body is warm and comforting, but it's not just the safety that attracts me to his side. My subconscious mind acts and begins to reconcile with the decisions I've consciously made in recent days, to become more bold and to use my initiative, something so rarely exercised before.

Clutching Hisao's arm, not too tightly, I reply to his previous query. "The staff at the o-orphanage offered me some options on what I could do. Middle school... hadn't been good, so I thought that Yamaku might be better. It was isolated, and I thought it might be easier to get by here with most of the others being disabled."

I wonder if he realises the irony, that we bonded so much despite having such different reasons to come here. Polar opposites, in fact. My condition is mostly external, the mental situation aside, while for Hisao it's completely internal (other than the operation scars). Although we both had troubles fitting in, even if my difficulty was so much more pronounced than his. I conveniently 'forgot' to mention, for that matter, just how tough it ended up being for me.

"What was life like at the orphanage?"

"It was... okay. The staff there were nice, and they took care of us. The children there didn't talk to me much, but I didn't really want to talk with them either, so I didn't mind." They were never the problem. They had to live with me, so they grew to tolerate me at least. As for the staff, even if they didn't actively help me or do much to dissuade the few bullies, they were decent enough. I felt safe, and almost happy with them. School was the problem, being out there in the world and having to face the prejudice so inherent in our society, more so in Japan. Teachers and children alike, with no obligation to support me and a matter of honour to shun me.

I return my thoughts to a better frame of mind, as I continue. "The orphanage had a little library, so I started to read to pass the time. The staff didn't mind it, because it made me easier to handle than many of the other children."

"You didn't make any friends there?"

I didn't, but it's something I accepted long ago. "No. I think... my life was on hold... during that time. I knew that, but I didn't mind."

We leave the main building and wander into the main courtyard, the school behind us with the dormitory wings on either side. The sky is orange, a bright sunset framing the scene. I can't avoid glancing at Hisao, but he looks away. Why? Could it be out of nerves, awkwardness, or something else? His face gives nothing away, and I look elsewhere myself, avoiding the hypocrisy of staring.

I ask him, "What was it like in the hospital?"

He waits for a moment, before resuming the discussion. "It was okay at times, but at others it was pretty bad. At the beginning, everyone sent their sympathies, and came to visit often. It was just like breaking an arm or something." His simile is lost on me, as I've never broken a limb, nor had the same kind of care from others when in hospital. I was too young to really remember much of my time there, but what I do remember is enough. Certainly I didn't get visitors, my parents having died and whatever other relatives I had deciding to wash their hands of me.

"Meeting all my friends," he continues, "was one of the good times. Iwanako came in often as well; more often than anyone else." At her name, I expect the usual pang of jealousy, but this time it doesn't come. Perhaps because I realise, I'm closer now to Hisao than she ever was. I don't think this in a malicious or selfish way, more so in a statement of the facts. I've spent more time with Hisao these past few weeks, without him being in a hospital bed, but actually doing things and building that friendship. If things had been different, I may never have even met him, and none of this would matter.

"But there were bad times, too. When my friends slowly stopped visiting, I began to realise how grave my situation was. It reminded me that this wasn't just a broken limb, but that I was now a different person than before. Even the times Iwanako would spend with me became torturous. By the end, we were reduced to silence, whereas before, she'd be talking constantly." Hearing him speak is such an insight into the slow decay of so many friendships, so many relationships, and it hurts me to hear him, the bitterness creeping back slowly. However, I promised to listen, to allow him to bare himself mentally in return for me doing the same. I asked for it, and it would be a poor decision to back away now. The pain needs to be shared.

"I think the three lowest points would have been when my parents told me I wouldn't be going to my old school any more, my birthday passing while I was in the hospital, and... when Iwanako left for the last time." Jealousy aside, whatever I may feel, I can't deny that one's first love will always be something memorable, something to cherish in the darkest times and mourn the end of.

We head through the gardens, leaving the busy school behind us and passing into a quieter environment. "What was your middle school like?" I ask Hisao. I have no desire to relive my own middle school memories, but I'm interested to hear of his.

"I liked it. I grew up in a really metropolitan area, and the middle school was nearby, so it was pretty crowded. I didn't mind it, probably because I'm used to being in crowds and around lots of other people." What seems like

hell to me is heaven to him. Yet another contrast, yet another way we fit together like a jigsaw puzzle despite the differences between us. "I got good marks, and I played soccer with my friends. I spent a fair bit of time hanging out with them after school as well. Did get teased a bit over my hair, though."

Now I'm the one puzzled. "Your hair?" I frown slightly. It looks fine to me.

"I'd keep getting tufts and strands that refused to flatten or stay where I wanted them," he says, "and my mother wouldn't let me just get my hair shaved." As he speaks, he puts a hand to his head, seemingly out of habit rather than any real need to flatten his apparently unruly locks. "It had a habit of popping out, no matter how much I tried to brush it down."

I can see what he means, it does look a bit messy, but not really anything I noticed before now. Definitely not as bad as he's claiming. Then again... "It still does, a little."

"I was worried I'd get that reply."

I'm not sure how to react. "S-sorry, I didn't mean to...!" He laughs a little and waves a hand, brushing away any offence.

"It's fine, I know it still does." I laugh as well, only a bit, but enough to show I realise he was joking. Not that I realised before, and I muse briefly how that would have been obvious to anyone other than me, but at least I'm in a position now where I can start to learn these aspects of social conventions, and become more natural in the way I act.

Our journey has looped around now, through the gardens and grounds and back to the courtyard. We walk towards the girls' dormitories, not with any clear direction but more out of a natural progression. I still cling to Hisao's arm, out of affection as much as for protection, and it's comforting to me to know he's not pushing me away. We enter the building, passing another small group that drives me closer to Hisao, and we continue up the stairs. I realise now, whether intentionally or not, I've been leading the way the whole time.

This is a new development.

"Why did we come to your dormitory room?" he asks me, and I think of an answer. I suppose my subconscious mind brought us here, to seek out and take the opportunity that I wished would come, to bare myself to Hisao not just in a mental sense, but to show him just how deeply my scars lie.

"Hanako?" He stops as we reach the door to my room, while I look straight ahead, still nervous about answering the question. I hesitate, unsure whether to say anything, then decide not to and open the door. He follows me in, as I hoped he would, and as he waits I turn to look at him directly. Before he has the chance, I finally start to speak.

"Could you... close and lock the door?"

I do this knowing exactly where it might lead. Education on... that topic... has been an important part of the Yamaku curriculum in previous semesters, considering that although technically against the rules, the faculty are well aware of what may happen when several dozen teenagers (almost all going through the same bodily changes regardless of the state of said bodies) share living space together. If I didn't want this, on some mental level, then I would never have brought him here. If nothing happens, then no harm done, and if it does... well, that's a hurdle we can cross when we reach it. Or am I reading too deeply into this...?

As he turns the key, I first remove my shoes, then place one hand on my heart, and move it towards the buttons on my blouse. The other hand is on the other side of my breast, pausing, undoing the top buttons, stopping after the first. Hisao returns and looks across, stopping dead in his tracks as I remember the windows and move to close the curtains. My back is directed to him, my fingers deftly continuing to undo at least the top few buttons, leaving the highest part of my blouse loose save for the ribbon at my throat. I make a concerted effort not to stammer or allow my voice to falter in any way as I speak, forcing myself to be calm.

"You told me about your past, so I have to tell you mine." That was the agreement we made, and it's something I wouldn't have done if I didn't feel

confident enough to be so honest with him. I take a deep breath, move my fingers to the piece of cloth around my neck, and pull away the knot keeping it secure.

"H-Hanako..." Now he's the one stammering. It starts to drive me back towards my own impediment of speech, yet I remain focused. It gives me something of a thrill, to see our roles reversed so drastically, though knowing what I'm about to reveal about my past threatens to drag my old neuroses and worries back into the fray.

"P-please... don't say anything." He stays silent, following my instructions, as I finish undoing my blouse with my back still turned to him. I move my fingers under the shirt to my back and unclasp my bra, feeling for the first time self-conscious. Still he says nothing, and I assume his silence to be consent to continue. Consent works both ways, after all, and regardless of my own comfort (even if it is very much on the border), Hisao's comfort is something that must also be considered.

Clothes loose from the waist up, I next take off the clip of my skirt, allowing it to drop to the ground around my feet. Finally, I take my blouse in my hands, gently lowering it to display the horror that adorns my body. The bra falls away with it, leaving me standing in only my underwear and stockings. It's the most vulnerable I've ever felt, and yet strangely, also the most liberated. I understand that this state of being is fully in my control.

"This is me. All... of me."

I allow him a moment to see just how the fire affected me, on a purely physical level. The mental scars run much deeper, and it's time he understood just how much. I'm lucky to be alive, and it's thanks to great sacrifice that I'm able to even be here. To finally tell the tale.

"The fire happened when I was eight years old. It was night, and we were sleeping when it started." My hands shake and I know he can see as the blouse drifts too, still clutched between my fingers. My voice breaks as I return to those awful memories, the same ones I try to hide from every day of my life. "I... curled up into a ball... when the fire swept over me. My

mother... tried to shield me. Th-that's the only reason... I lived..." Tears well in my eyes as the buried emotions surface. Hisao remains silent.

"I'm sorry... for making you see this." His lack of reaction forces me to utter these words, brings me so close to regressing to my previous state of existence, to the timid and broken girl I used to be. No! I have to endure... I have to be strong...

"It doesn't matter," says Hisao. "You're a wonderful person, Hanako. Your body doesn't change that." I look across at him, but fail to focus on him. I'm lost in the memories, conflicting between the pain of seeing my parents die before my eyes, a corpse positioned between me and a burning abyss, and the happy times I've shared not only with Hisao, but with Lilly too, and Akira, and even Yuuko. I realise how much this must mean to him, in multiple ways, and how exposed I've made myself only for the chance, the possible sacrifice, to be worth so much. His words are like a lightning rod stirring me to continue, driving me forward, convincing me that this is not in vain. Convincing me I've made the right choice.

He walks towards me, and I let go of the blouse as he touches my shoulder lightly. My reaction is partly out of being startled, but it's also a sign - I want to continue. He places both hands on me, one on each shoulder. I want him to see that I'm not just a girl. I'm an adult woman, with the same feelings and urges any woman has. "I know... that I'm not pretty... like Lilly. I just... wanted you... to see me. The real me." I hope he understands what I mean. The real me... inside and out.

"I've already seen the real you, though. You didn't need to take off your clothes for that."

I'm not sure if he does understand or not. I open my lips just a tiny amount, barely noticeable, and let out the smallest of sighs. Hisao moves closer, and his lips touch mine. He does understand, and I let out a bigger breath, one that I hadn't realised I was holding. It lasts for only a few seconds, though it feels like longer, and I know that he feels that way too. Such a relief for me. My first kiss...

I look into his eyes, unsure whether to proceed or halt before things go too far. It's conflicting within me, how much I want this, how I want him to see how strong I can be to be able to take such a step, and yet a part of me considers this may not be such a great idea. Nevertheless, after a brief moment of hesitation, Hisao follows suit, removing his tie and undoing the buttons of his shirt. As he reveals his body to me I look down at the ground, not entirely certain how to react and allowing the nerves to get the better of me again. Still, I make no move to stop him, nor to move away. If I really want things to stop I know to say the words, to make it clear.

Even so, despite knowing and anticipating the inevitable next step, my body still flinches without warning, on pure instinct, when I hear him pull down the zip on his trousers. It seems he's as nervous as I am though, as he removes everything else but leaves his light blue boxers on. It's understandable, if it's his first time (as I assume), the same as it is mine. "Hanako..."

I need to take the initiative again, though it's a question of the two parts of my mind fighting for control. One part wants this, so desperately, and to take the leap in our strange relationship. The other part, while not willing to step away, advocates caution. I end up nodding and walking to the bed, though the stiffness in my legs gives away the battle. Hisao then tries to take the same measure, making a bold move too, but he's as awkward as I am. He sits on the bed, looks at me, then away to the floor, trying to avoid staring. On one hand I wonder if it's because he doesn't find me attractive, though if that were the case why would he allow things to get this far? Or is it to preserve my own modesty, in which case it's both almost laughable and sweet at the same time.

I choose to move forward with things, and sit between his legs on the edge of the bed, my back positioned against his chest, our scars meeting as one. A wave of emotion runs over me, love and lust combining to make my breath shallow, a warm sensation rushing through my most intimate parts. I don't know if Hisao can hear my breath becoming faster or feel my heart racing, but he places one hand upon my left breast, and his other on my

right thigh. He starts to stroke the inside of my leg gently, a tender caress as a tiny squeak forces itself from my lips.

"Sorry," as he stops abruptly. "I didn't mean to startle you." No, don't stop. Please. I feel safe here, in your arms, though my only clear response is a brief shake of the head.

I think how this may not be so bad, but what does he think? Am I still the vulnerable waif in need of protection, or is he starting to see me as a woman? The implications of the former are too distressing to consider, so I shut them out and try to force myself to enjoy the moment, allowing the waves of pleasure to wash over me with his touch.

He continues, massaging the tip of my nipple and lightly stroking the breast, a soft motion that only serves to intensify my arousal. After a little while I stop being so tense and begin to relax, letting myself drop a little into his arms. My breathing slows and I let myself enjoy the moment. My nipples harden, my underwear starts to become ever so slightly moist. Hisao takes this as a sign, moving his hand slowly down towards my legs, and between them. He gives me plenty of time to say no, to protest, but I stay quiet and let the flow continue. I adjust my position instead, forcing myself closer into him as I feel his own arousal growing, a hard lump (a bit larger, it seems, than I expected) pushing its own way against me. From this, I know now. I want him, so badly. His fingers start to move, on the outside of my underwear, pressing in and making me feel so good, rubbing against the most sensitive part of my body. My breathing gets faster, my body tenses, and then...

He stops again. This time I'm relieved, not wanting the moment to reach its end so soon. A long breath is let out, my face lifts up to meet his eyes, and although I say nothing I allow my expression to do the talking. I want more, so much more, and this taste is hardly satisfying.

Hisao nods, no more, no less. He waits, before pushing away from me and further up the bed. My head falls back on the pillow, still breathing heavily, still desperate for his touch. I look at him again and open my legs to show

my willingness. He moves closer, prompting a nod from me, no words needed to display what we both want. He pulls down the stockings as far as my knees, takes both legs in his hands, and lifts, to reveal my vagina, pulling aside my underpants to show the eager sight. There's no going back now, my deepest desires are unfulfilled as of yet, and I can't allow them to go unsatisfied for much longer. He seems to agree, returning his delicate fingers to the area of my pleasure and continuing the motions of before. My breathing comes quickly once more and the arousal becomes more intense and more sustained, my body screaming out for his attentions.

He knows what I want, he must know, as he finally undoes the button on his boxers and moves closer, allowing his hardened penis to emerge. It's larger than I thought, though I don't exactly have anything to compare it to... almost too large, for my first time...

He hesitates, as if he can sense my fears about the size. No lubrication save my own natural flow, my fears take on a new form... I look into his eyes, and a new realisation dawns. His face is red, eyes closed, and his breathing heavy, and I don't think it's only because of the situation we've entered so hesitantly. After all, there's still a reason we're both at Yamaku.

"Are you... okay...?"

He opens his eyes and looks at mine. "I'm okay. I was just making sure that I was." That's alright, and I nod in reply. He responds with another kiss, leaning over me and brushing his lips against mine, our tongues just peeking out to touch in yet another display of newly discovered intimacy. I let the tension in my body go and prepare myself, before he pulls back again. I wonder why as he feels around for his trousers, and although I wonder why he's carrying the little foil packet around campus with him, I recall a recent lecture on sex education from Mutou-sensei warning us all to be prepared. I didn't think Hisao would be this prepared, admittedly, but as he slides the condom onto his erection I can't help but laugh. Nothing more than a tiny giggle, but more out of relief considering the lubricated variety Hisao was kind enough to provide, which should hopefully make things a bit easier.

That being said, his preparation does little to ease my concerns on the situation. Maybe he didn't expect this to happen, but potentially at some point, would he have made the move? If so, then did I really need to push forward so much, going against all my previous movements within our tangled relationship? Putting my heart on the line for something that may have happened in a more natural state sooner or later, easing the tension we can both instinctively feel and making this affair so much easier to handle. Surely this can't be the best idea, using sex to build bridges that were never truly broken in the first place!

We return to our positions, finally ready to begin. Hisao grips his penis to guide it into place, where my eyes are pointing. He breaths in and moves forward, hips pressed against mine, feeling for the opening. It's not what I would call erotic, the tension still so great between us, and yet the emotions are there.

"Aaah!" I let out a brief cry of pain, cut short, as he enters me fully, our hips pushing hard against each other. It's not a problem, but for my first time, to take something so big and break through, it hurts a little. I'd heard it would. I just never, before meeting Hisao, expected to experience it first hand.

Another moment of hesitation as he looks at me, concerned. I don't want him to stop, especially now he's already inside me, so I try to smile as the pain goes away. I don't think he's convinced, though. Still, he waits for me to get used to the feeling, without leaving me, and after a while begins to move back and forth in a steady fashion.

The pain is gone, I hardly remember it being there in the first place. My worries subside for a moment. Instead they've all been replaced by a warm feeling, more intense than anything I've achieved myself in my solitary shower sessions. Moans escape my lips, brief gasps of delight as the feeling builds and forces my body to convulse, lightly at first then more and more and more as I inch ever closer to climax. As he enters and pulls away and enters again, our skin rubbing together, my clitoris is softly stimulated, making the feeling so much more powerful. I never knew it could be this good!

It's not all so enjoyable, though, as the pain starts to return, less in my nether regions and more to do with the scar tissue that still has never fully healed. We move around to try and minimise the pain and maximise the pleasure, focusing on each other and nothing more. I still feel excited down below, my moans threatening to become louder screams of passion, although we both know we can't allow my neighbours to hear. The thrusting becomes quicker, I tense up more and more and feel Hisao doing the same, knowing that his time is approaching just as mine is. "Hanako...!"

As he calls my name I shriek in ecstasy, and we reach climax together; I feel a twitching inside me as the orgasm races through my body and mind and soul. It takes a few seconds but it seems like so much longer, his twitches putting pressure on my sensitive parts and making me come even more, forcing me to turn and repeating the effect with him. I breathe in, then out, and in again, finally letting myself relax and enjoying the moment, our bodies resting against each other. Every inch of me is in euphoria, every point where our skin meets only heightening the sensation. My dark thoughts are briefly forgotten.

Hisao falls to the side of me, head resting on the pillow. Both of us naked, the most intimate and difficult moment of my life over all too soon. We're both drenched in sweat, but none of it matters, both of us exhausted yet lying side by side on a bed built for one. The pain is a distant memory for me and I know that next time, if there ever is a next time, it will be easier.

I look across to Hisao to see a hand on his chest, where his heart lies, and his eyes closed. I don't know quite what to do, but his breathing is under control. My waiting pays off as less than a minute later, he opens his eyes to meet my gaze.

"I'm... okay. Everything's... back to normal."

I smile in relief, and whatever thoughts Hisao may be having, whatever doubts are in his mind, I feel as if they're assuaged by my happy face. He returns the smile, and I can sense how genuine he is, how pleased he is for everything that we just went through. Still, the doubts are creeping around

in my mind. I have no doubt he wanted this, but he just wanted to protect me before. How must he be feeling, especially if he believes I was playing along to satisfy his own desires? This was my choice, I understood from the beginning, yet it's easy to see how it may look to an outsider, let alone a young man who admittedly isn't the most perceptive. My awkwardness didn't help, and regardless of Hisao's feelings (whatever they may be) it didn't do me any favours during our time together.

My thoughts return to troubling implications, and I think again that maybe what we did wasn't the best idea. I wanted to show him how strong I was, I wanted to open up to him as an equal, and I certainly wanted to push our relationship further and make him realise my feelings for him. Now, I'm worried that I may have gone too far in the wrong direction, reawakening those protective instincts similar to the ones cultivated once by Lilly in the early days. We may be adults, depending on the sense of the term, but sex to solve an emotional issue has never been good advice. One step forward, and how many steps back? Caught up in the moment, how much damage has our passion done on that emotional level?

Now I can hardly sleep, even as Hisao's eyes close and his gentle snores begin. My mind is too worried about the fallout from our evening together. Whatever happens, I know that tomorrow... tomorrow will change everything.

32. Act 4, Chapter 8C: I'll Hold My Breath

Act 4 – Chapter Seven, Third Branch: I'll Hold My Breath

My eyes flicker open, then close again, sleep still taking hold of me for a few moments more. After a little while, they re-open, and stay that way. My thoughts drift back to last night, and... last night! I panic slightly, looking across to my partner for last night's activities, to see him still sleeping, between myself and the wall. At least I don't have to manoeuvre over him to escape the confines of my bed.

I think back to our dealings of the evening before, the moment of my awakening, and how I truly became a woman, no longer some child both searching for and refusing all aid. Yet a deep sense of embarrassment grows, beginning life as a tiny knot in my heart and expanding as I dwell more on what happened between us. What will he want now? I can't work out if Hisao will choose to honour what we did, and pursue a relationship, or if he'll decide to forget it ever happened and shun me as so many probably would. Or even something in between, whatever that could be. As for me, I'm happy in part, for my own boldness and for the massive step I undertook, and then I feel weak and scared, reverting once more to the child I once was. How can I ever hope to resolve my issues like this? I feel as if the sex last night has only made things worse.

I try to push it out of mind, something to think about later when I have a moment to focus on my next steps. Time later as well to witness Hisao's reaction, and make a decision then. I know that although I'm far from better, I've at least confirmed to myself (if no-one else) that the strength within me is not still hidden away, but brought to the fore and finally used in some manner. That's enough, for now.

I quietly slide out of bed, my naked flesh burning again with desire as soon as I pull the covers and (though accidentally) see Hisao's form underneath. I hold back, and put the covers over him again, as comfortably as I can. I reach for my nightgown, feeling the silk on my bare skin, and fold his clothes neatly in the corner, picking up the foil wrapper discarded on the

floor and placing it in the bin by my desk. It's only now that I think back to him having a condom in the first place. It suggests to me that he expected something to happen between us eventually, but last night was my doing more so than his. It conflicts me again, the pleasure of knowing he must have felt that attraction to me physically, and yet the worry of whether he intended anything to happen or not, had I not made the first move. In any case, I'm glad he thought to bring one, as I certainly forgot. Better safe than sorry.

I retire to the bathroom and take a shower, returning to my room to find Hisao still asleep. He really does sleep late, I notice. He clearly can't hear me, though I am creeping about, trying not to disturb him. I dress, and leave once more to prepare breakfast for the two of us. Nothing fancy, just a couple of microwave meals, but it's the least I can do considering he stayed with me through the night. He'll have to get up soon though, as it's still a school day, and I highly doubt Mutou-sensei will accept the aftermath of sex as a valid reason for being late.

My thoughts are still distant from my worries and fears, deliberately so, when I return to my bedroom with two meals, one for each of us. It's a little tough to open the door without spilling anything, but I somehow manage it, through clever use of elbows and wrists. As I enter, I notice Hisao, out of bed and fully dressed, standing just next to the bed.

"Good morning, Hanako."

I can't ignore him, not that I want to, so I try to answer as normally as I can. "M... morning." I bow slightly, in the formal manner of our culture, and make my way to the desk, setting down the two dishes. It's satay, chicken skewered on bamboo sticks in a tangy sauce, and rice to accompany. Nothing fancy, but definitely enough to alleviate the hunger, and hopefully help stave off any tension between us for a few moments more. Hisao thanks me, and we start to eat. I sit at the desk, while Hisao takes the edge of the bed. At least while we eat we're not expected to talk, but even so I take the chance to observe Hisao, a few brief glances here and there. I can

see he's doing the same thing, looking at me, catching my eye, then looking away again before repeating the strange cycle.

I wonder what could be going through his mind? I wish I knew, because then the silence would be so much easier to bear. Damned if you do, damned if you don't. Any attempt at conversation will no doubt be doomed to failure, to stuttering and awkward silences worse than the one we'd be trying to fill. But the silence now is just as bad, and either way we cannot win.

The silence continues after we finish eating. We put our plates and forks in the sink; we leave my room and make our way out of the dormitories, thankfully early enough to avoid the stares of my neighbours who would surely find some comment to make about the whole affair. Throughout, neither myself nor Hisao say a word. We don't hold hands as we've done so often before, we don't pass comment on the weather or the meal or any number of small things that could break the tension. We exit the dormitories and enter the main school building where our fellow students are busy preparing for another day of study. We remain silent even to the point of reaching our own classroom, still together but further apart than ever before.

It's too much.

When we enter the classroom, I realise our mistake. We should have come here separately, but too late for that now. Shizune is seated already, watching us as we enter together, eyebrows raised though no comment passed through her erstwhile interpreter. Misha's silence is telling, but as for what it tells, I can't be sure.

In contrast to the lack of sound coming from Misha, the silence is ultimately broken by a single comment from Hisao. "S-see you." Admittedly, one that doesn't make much sense given we share the same class. I reply regardless:

"Okay." He waves a little, in such an awkward manner, and we take our seats, no further words passing between us. I look at him, watching him,

wondering if he'll make any kind of move, but there's nothing. Shizune, however, gets out of her seat and starts to walk towards him, and my fears are piqued. I'm saved from her finding out what happened though, by the timely arrival of our teacher, forcing her back to her desk and away from the certain questions still to be answered.

Lectures proceed as normal, and again I'm able to force the awkward thoughts out of my brain, focusing solely on Mutou-sensei's voice and the lessons he is trying to teach. It's tough, but for my own sanity, to avoid tearing myself apart with contradictions and indecisiveness I use whatever means I can to keep my mind fixed on the teacher, and not on Hisao or the events of last night. For the most part, it seems to work. My mind is blank when the bell rings to end the morning. At least, until Hisao leaves his desk and walks across to me.

My first instincts take over and I look down at the light timber, feeling the blood rush to my face and my cheeks rise in temperature. He stops short, attempts to speak, and fails. This is worse than if we weren't speaking at all, having him come to me and be unable to bring words together! I can't bear it, I can't continue to operate hoping he'll have the decency or courage to say anything, yet nor can I bring myself to speak in his stead. I wish I knew what was going through his mind, so I could at least know whether he intended to progress beyond what we did last night! It's too hard...

Behind Hisao I see a familiar pair approaching. One with pink hair, one without. Around us I can hear faint whispering and see a few stares, our fellow students passing comment to each other on the joint arrival of me and Hisao. I have to cut this off before things get worse, though I see his mouth open before I can speak. My reaction is an old favourite, and of course it hardly makes me feel any better.

"I... I... I'vegottogodosomething!" As always.

I flee, with no thought given to the items scattered from my desk in my wake. My bag is safely hanging from my shoulder, carrying my books and any other essentials from class, but it hardly matters now. I need to speak to

him, but not with everyone around. Hisao's lack of reaction, the silence of the morning, it all suggests to me that perhaps what we did last night was the wrong thing. I realise I came on much too strongly, beyond anything he could have expected, and maybe I intimidated him a little. Then again, I'm not exactly an intimidating person, and there's no way I could have achieved that, really. No, it was my mistake to think that giving him what he wanted would solve everything. All I've done is overload the potential relationship and then break it apart, all through my own stupidity.

And yet, every time I've made a move, pushed past my own fears of failure, my own worries about everything that broke down in my life, I've had to hit that same wall on the other side. It's not just me who was broken, and although Hisao's past is so much less traumatic than mine, I was naïve enough to focus only on my own despair, and never consider what it was like for him to have to deal with me. In a way, it makes it all the more understandable that he would shy away now. In another way, it drives me further down, worrying again about his lack of reaction, how distant he's become after my mistake last night. The contradictions circle ever closer in my mind, but now we've reached a turning point, and after what we did, there's no going back.

No. I can't bring myself to blame him. My actions last night were my own decision, and whatever fallout comes, I have to deal with it myself. And the first step is to talk, but when we're both ready. It will be difficult, but I can accept that. I have to.

My mind slightly clearer, albeit not much, I make a quick detour to my room to get changed and to drop off my school bag (I really can't bring myself to return to classes today), and then begin the long walk down the hill. As I walk I think briefly on the events that have led me to this point, how weak willed and scared I once was, and how far I've come. How strong I've managed to become. Every decision made, by myself, by Hisao, and even by Lilly, in a more indirect sense. I try to keep emotion out of it, thinking rationally, and that's as hard a task as the one I'm anticipating later. Wherever, whenever the conversation takes place, emotion is at the heart of it, and it will either make our relationship once more, or destroy it.

I drift aimlessly around the streets for a while. I take in a cup of tea, alone, at the Shanghai – Yuuko isn't there, too busy dealing with the influx of students trying to prepare in the library back at Yamaku, rushing to learn at the last minute for their remaining exams. I pass by the shops, sticking to the smaller, quieter streets, and leaving the main thoroughfares alone. Suddenly, I hear the tone of my mobile phone in my pocket. Taking it out, Hisao's name appears on the screen. He's chosen to get in touch, then. Not a phone call, though – a text.

"Hanako, if you want to talk, I'll be at the park in town for a while."

Such a simple, short message, but the ball's now in my court. Should I go, or should I wait? The former will be tough, and I'm not sure that I'm ready. The latter, however, would simply be putting off the inevitable. It's really no choice at all.

It takes me around ten minutes to reach the park, but seems longer. I guess he didn't expect me to be in town before him, but it's a neutral, safe place for us to talk. If it all goes wrong, I can always just walk away. If I can bring myself to leave. I see him as I enter the park, a few shops and a bakery to one side bringing with it the smell of fresh bread and cakes. No sense in putting it off any longer...

"H...Hisao...?" It looks like I've startled him, as he drops something on the floor and jerks up, head turning to face me.

"Hanako..." Was this a mistake? I break eye contact and start to mess around with a lock of hair, uncertain of what to do or where to go. It's all so different now, and I feel as though I was kidding myself to believe that talking would help. Do we really have anything to say to each other? Does he?

"Hanako... I..." He stumbles on the words, a trait more common to me than to him. "What we did that night... how should I interpret that?"

I stop. He's asking me? He really wants to know what I think? It's time for me to be brutally honest. Brutal for myself. "I thought... you might

eventually go away if I was only someone you needed to protect." My words are steady, the stammer stays away for now. I'm surprised at myself, how calm I seem, when really inside I'm a complete mess. "I thought that if I let you do that... you might see me as someone more than that."

It's true. I hate to admit it to myself like this, but it's true. I let myself expose my body and my most vulnerable aspect because I thought it would make him happy. I know I wanted it too, but it's only with hindsight that I realise how foolish I was. I want to believe the best of Hisao, but did he just use me, take advantage of my emotional state and step back when he realised what I was doing? It's all too confusing, and I thought that talking would make it easier to handle.

I have to believe the best of him, because if not, then there's no hope for either of us. It's tough, though. "I knew..." I continue, "you couldn't look at me that way..." My words are barely audible, almost a sigh of resignation.

"In what way? What do you mean?"

I must explain how I feel, because this is the only chance I'll get. And, to be honest, there's some resentment there. It's not quite what I expected, but my emotions right now are a strange mix between the positive and negative, and I need to reconcile the two. Time for some home truths, for us both. "All I ever was to you was... a useless person. Just someone... to protect. Someone like... a child."

He needs to know, to understand how he makes me feel, and how wrong it is. I think back to this time a few short weeks ago, when I would never have had the courage to stand here and say this to him. In a way, that was always part of the problem. "I-I wanted to be more to you than that," I continue, "but after so long... I... got used to it."

It's not only him I resent. Hisao was certainly the one who treated me in such a way, but I allowed him to do so for so long. Oh, sure, I made attempts, feeble flights of fancy to try and break out of the rut, but it took me so long to finally do so that by the time it happened, I was making nothing but wrong decisions, pushing us both further and further down a

path that could have ended in disaster for our friendship, let alone any relationship that may have happened. I consider that there were occasions, somewhere down the line, that could have gone either way, where I had no control over the situation. Any one of a number of variables could have affected the final outcome, and without intending to I allowed Hisao to control them all. Not in a malicious or nasty way, but simply by circumstance. It's sheer luck that he made the right choices, that led us to this point. But were they the right choices? Could things have ended up worse?

I carry on speaking. It needs to be said. "After I came out of my room... I saw that you had started drifting away. I felt like I was going to lose you, because... you wanted somebody you could have... that kind of relationship with." He made the first moves, but after I left my room during the troubled times, earlier than I had planned, I did all the running. It's only now, after last night, that I understand it all myself.

I thought back then that I was making so much progress, becoming stronger, becoming more independent, able to break away from the rut. I was a fool. My reverie continues.

"You were more quiet in school than before, and you were getting on so well with Yuuko... I thought... that I might lose you."

I take a second to catch my breath, and Hisao takes the chance to respond. "But... we're friends, right? I wouldn't just abandon you like that, even if what you're saying was true." He pauses, allowing me to speak once more.

Friends. Lines blurring between the spaces. What does it mean to me now?

"Friendship... was something I thought I'd given up on. I stopped believing in others... after what happened after the accident... before the accident happened, I got on well with people and other children. I didn't have many friends... but I didn't mind, because I treasured the ones that I had. Afterwards, though..."

It's hard for me to recall. Not through the remembrance, but through my willingness to do so. "I was called names by the others, and teased a lot. It hurt... really deeply. The teachers tried to help, but they couldn't do much, and even many of them recoiled just at the sight of me." That wasn't even the worst part. I've talked before about how institutionalised the prejudice is in Japan, how deeply it cuts through our very society. I expected, I guess on a subconscious level, the horror of the teachers as well as my fellow students. I didn't expect the other, more hateful reaction.

"Among those calling me names and teasing me... were the ones that I thought were my closest friends. From then on, I believed that it didn't matter if nobody else acknowledged me. All my existence ever did was make people troubled, after all. It was... easier... if I just didn't exist."

That was why I became such a recluse, and hid away from the world. If I didn't exist to the rest of the world, everything would be alright. Out of sight, out of mind. Needless to say, my plans were less than successful. "But after meeting Lilly, and then you... I tried, but I... couldn't make myself think that way again."

I try to gauge his reaction, but Hisao's face shows nothing. I get a feeling though, that I've hurt him. It's not a good thing for me to do, but he needs to understand just how things have been for me, so we can start to move forward. If he wants to. Then again, to be fair, it hurts me too, that we've reached this point, and what I have to do to make things right again.

"Hanako, if you'd just told me..."

"Was I... wrong?" I put him on the spot. Now is the pivotal moment. How will he answer?

"Of course you..." He pauses. Thinking. He answers. "I mean... I don't look at you that way now." It's a confession, he once did think of me like that, as I suspected. And yet, he seems to be saying that... he sees me differently now. Is that right? Is that true? "I got worried about you after what happened to you in class, and I thought I should try to protect you. When

you locked yourself in your room, though, I got afraid. I thought you were rejecting me, and it forced me to think a lot about... different things."

This is the most honest conversation we've ever had, but has it come too late? It seems to me we've been through nothing but a parade of mixed signals, confusion on both sides, and inexperience giving way to mistakes that have inexorably led to this awkwardness now. I reply with the truth, as he has done, and wonder if it will be enough... "I wasn't rejecting you!" Only after my outburst do I realise how it must sound, how loud and sudden it appears to be. Still, he has to know. "I wouldn't ever do that. Not to you. Even though I was scared... even though I tried to push you away... you still tried to get closer to me." The words come tumbling out like they never have before. "I locked myself away because... I was just a burden to you. To Lilly. To everyone."

That's what I became, through my own weakness, and Hisao taught me how to be strong. Yet even then, I couldn't face the harsh truths that are pouring out from us both now. I made up lies and deceits to myself to try and persuade my mind that everything was okay, that I was improving, and that the darkest days were nothing but a bitter memory. Even in the past few weeks. Especially then. "E-every birthday was the same. Everyone doing their best to pretend that I mattered. Everyone pretending everything was all right... for that one day of the year. I didn't want to exist... but they wouldn't let me. Even after meeting Lilly... everything was the same. I was as useless as I'd always been, unable to do anything for her, or for myself. I didn't want to be the same way... to you."

I give him a chance to speak. To respond to every confession that my lips have uttered. "After you locked yourself in your room," says Hisao, "I decided to try to work out my past as well, and sort out my future. I didn't know how to deal with the things I'd lost by coming to Yamaku, so I was trying to sort them out myself. I thought... it would help us become better friends... if I did that."

He stops speaking, and silence reigns. We can barely look at each other. I can feel the situation growing beyond control, for either of us, and worry

that talking is too late, that the past has happened and can't be changed, can never be erased. I don't consider that maybe it's better to keep the past stable, so the future can learn from those mistakes. Only much later does that ever cross my mind.

I can't bear it any more. I let my emotions take over, my conscious mind pushed to the back, and drop to my knees. The tears stream down my face; I let them hit the ground uncared for.

I can't take this! My world is crashing around me, breaking into pieces, because I was a stupid fool who dared to think that maybe, just maybe, everything could be alright, and someone could love me for who I am, not just what they thought they could do to protect me, to treat me like a fragile doll who needs constant smothering to keep me from the evils of the world, someone who would never let me try and gain the strength I needed, the strength I thought I'd gained in these last few weeks, someone who...

My self-loathing monologue stops abruptly, as I feel a pair of arms around me. Not strong, but familiar, and strangely comfortable. Was I... was I wrong?

"I'm sorry, Hisao... I-I've messed up everything..." I can barely speak for choking on the words, each one punctuated with a sob, forcing my misery on the world around me.

"It's fine. Everything's fine. I'm the one that should be sorry. I was meddling around behind your back, and I never told you anything." He should have. He should have told me, should have trusted me, should have supported me and not just treated me like porcelain...

As Hisao continues I can hear the words break, as he holds back the same tears that fall from my own eyes. "To tell you the truth, Hanako... I was scared. For the first time since my heart attack, I was really scared." Wh...why?

"Hisao...?"

"I lost so much when I came to Yamaku. I was... depending on you, more than I ever thought I did. Even now, I still have that hole inside me. After losing my entire life, and everyone I'd known, the thought of losing you, as well..."

He depended on me? How can that be right? "But I'm just a useless..."

"You're my friend, Hanako!" He cuts me off before I can finish. "You're... No, you're more than that. I love you, Hanako. I love you so much, that the thought of losing you frightened me so much..."

He... he loves me? I feel my heart beating faster, as it did every time I thought about my own feelings towards him, and the realisation that I felt the same way, before everything went to hell. I find myself beginning to understand, a little more, able to comprehend finally just why he treated me the way he did, if I was someone so precious to him. It's hard for me to believe, but I want to, oh so much.

"I'm sorry, Hisao... I can't help... feeling a bit happy. For so long... that's what I've wanted... to hear..."

The tears start in earnest this time, but not for sorrow. I'm not naive enough to believe this fixes everything. We still have a long way to go, but knowing that he loves me... it's more than I could have hoped for, everything that I wanted. We don't speak, but I can feel his body close to mine, holding me tightly, and a small smile creeps onto my face. A hidden smile, one that I thought would never show again, pushed deep below the layers of self-loathing and despair, finally allowed to fight its way to the surface with those precious words from his lips.

I don't know how long we stay like that. I don't care. This moment is all I need.

We disengage after a while, and walk together, following the path, hands held and not a word spoken. Hisao drops a can (I'd barely noticed him holding it) into a bin and sits down on a nearby bench. I follow suit, taking a seat beside him. He's given me a handkerchief to wipe away the tears, but

the overall effect has been negligible. I'm not really sure that he looks any better, either.

"Have you calmed down a bit?" he asks, concerned for me more so than himself.

"Y-yes. Thank you." We wait again, before the silence is broken once more. I surprise myself by being the one to break it. "The weather is nice at this time of year."

It's idle chatter, nothing more, but it helps alleviate the tension slightly. "Yeah, it is." Hisao closes his eyes and continues, "You know... I don't really want to go back to classes, right now. Do you?"

Asking for my opinion, giving me the choice and allowing me to control the outcome... it seems like a new step, though not before time. It's refreshing, after all the heartbreak I had steeled myself for. I shake my head regardless, agreeing that I'd rather not be in class when I can be here with Hisao instead. "I'm sorry. For... everything."

"It's okay. I think we both have a bit to be sorry for."

He takes on some of the blame, and allows me to accept the part that is my fault. Perhaps a few days ago, even, I would have claimed all the fault for myself, while he would do likewise to himself, trying to protect me from my own mistakes and the consequences of them. Now, he's happy to share it out, and allow me to take responsibility for that which I deem to be mostly my fault. It really is a change. Still, I can't be everything he wants, and he still needs to realise that. I am me, and I can't change everything so easily and still be me.

"I know that..." I say. "I'm too shy. I know you don't want me to be, I don't think I can..."

"You can change, Hanako. I know that because, even in the time I've known you, you've already changed. To be honest, just being able to sit here and talk to you like this means that you've changed a lot since we first met."

I have to accept that, though not everything is so simple. I have changed, and for the better, but there's still a long road to travel. "But... I can't be like that for... anyone else. I don't have any plans for after school ends, either..." I've tried to avoid thinking about the future, too hung up always on the past. What should I do? I realise that Hisao knows now to give me the space I need, and hopefully when Lilly returns we can explain together the same to her. It should help.

"Just give yourself time, and I think you'll be able to achieve what you want. No, I'm sure that you'll be able to do it. I can see you've been trying, and I have faith in you. And you can depend on me if you feel like you need someone to support you, you know."

"B-but I can't ask that of you..."

"You can, because that's exactly what I'm asking of you. I'm going through the same thing, you know. It's called love." I understand now, just what he's saying. I remember hearing a phrase from some American film, a few years ago - "love means never having to say you're sorry". I recall thinking at the time how stupid it sounded, regardless of the romantic intention, but I can see now. A better phrase would be "love means supporting each other, so you never have to apologise for anything" - there would be nothing to apologise for in the first place. I think that makes sense, sort of.

I smile, in any case, confident that I comprehend what Hisao means. We both get up, in turn, and dust ourselves off from the leaves and blossom that fell on us as we were sitting. Hisao turns to me and asks, "I'm kinda hungry. Want to grab something to eat?" I'll admit, I'm hungry too, but that's not the important thing to me. Rather, it's the chance to spend time with him now on an equal footing, assured in the mutual belief that we can be partners without any kind of expectation or demands placed, without either of us having to become a crutch for the other. My response is a clear nod, an agreement to Hisao's question.

We walk together, across the street from the park and along the row of shops. "Hisao?"

"Yeah?"

"I... I think... I don't really understand you." It's true, but is it really an issue? Has everything been for naught, or can we learn to understand each other with time?

"I don't think I understand you, either. I believe that's fine, though."

That's fine by me. We can't break down these barriers so easily, but if things can get better, and we can move forward together, then I can accept that. This is more than I would have imagined could be possible between us after last night, and I'm driven to do something bold, something I wouldn't have considered previously despite my advances of the night before. I'm not certain though, if I can bring myself to make such a move, but my eyes begin to flicker between Hisao and the path ahead, hoping that he'll understand what I want to do.

"Is something on your mind?" he asks. "You look restless." I slow down, then stop dead, prompting him to do likewise. He notices, but he doesn't comprehend. I suppose... I'll have to take the chance. I look into his eyes, take a deep breath, and speak.

"I... I think... I think I have something... I need to give you." The nerves kick in and I begin to lose strength. Can I make this final leap, to seal in stone my love for him?

"What is it? You don't need to be evasive about it."

"I wanted to give you this for a long, long time, but... now that I need to... it's too embarrassing." I'm not sure I can do it...

"Don't worry. I'll accept it, whatever it is."

I smile, and take hold of his shoulder. Perhaps I can do it after all, now I know he won't reject me, won't push me away. "Then, please accept my first gift to you, Hisao..."

"Hanako...?"

One hand is on his shoulder, one is curled around his side. I lean forward, lips parted, and gently brush against his own. A slow, tender kiss, one returned in kind as our eyes close, and I dwell solely in the moment, ignoring the stares from those around us. If a moment could last forever, I would want this to be it. My true awakening, with the one I love.

To me, it's a new beginning, and the dawn of a bright new day...